

23 JUN 2002
Mahathir-Australia
DR M HITS HEADLINES IN AUSTRALIA

By: Neville D'Cruz

MELBOURNE, June 23 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's shock announcement he was quitting as Umno president, only to withdraw soon after, made headlines and captured the airwaves in Australia.

It was the lead story on Page One of "The Sunday Age" here with the banner heading "Mahathir uproar". It was written by the newspaper's Asia editor Mark Baker.

Describing the emotional event at the Umno General Assembly, Baker said: "The early evening drama has left serious questions about the future of Malaysia's political leadership and mounting speculation that an early general election will be called within months."

Baker said the announcement was made more stunning by the fact that Dr Mahathir "is seen by many analysts as being in a more powerful position than ever".

The Sunday Herald Sun foreign editor Mark Race reported that Dr Mahathir "looked fit and combative when he stood to address the (Umno) delegates".

Race said the Australian Foreign Affairs Department knew nothing about the political maelstrom engulfing Malaysia.

Opposition Foreign Affairs spokesman Kevin Rudd said Dr Mahathir's actions were uncharacteristic but made some sense.

"At 76, he is in reasonable health, but over the past few months, there have been speculations he would follow Lee Kuan Yew's lead and step down as head of the party to take on a senior minister's position," said Rudd, a former senior diplomat.

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