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Dr M stays on until Oct 2003 (HL)

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will remain Malaysia's Prime Minister, Umno president, Barisan Nasional chairman and Finance Minister until October next year, whereupon he will be succeeded by his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

The Umno supreme council, which convened a special meeting today, has agreed to the October 2003 date for Dr Mahathir to step down for a smooth transition of power to take place.

It is also to enable Dr Mahathir to lead Malaysia at the summit of the Organisation of Islamic Conference scheduled to be held in Kuala Lumpur on Oct 24 and 25 next year.

Abdullah said today that he is still Deputy Prime Minister and deputy Umno president but is and will be acting for Dr Mahathir in all his posts in the party and Government while the Prime Minister is on leave.

He said the Umno supreme council fully supported Dr Mahathir's decision to stay on and allow a smooth transition of power until he steps down and Abdullah takes over fully.

Abdullah told a Press conference after the meeting that the supreme council unanimously supported the formula for transition of power that would end any uncertainties arising from Dr Mahathir's decision to step down.

"When Dr Mahathir returns, he will fully undertake his responsibilities in all his party and Government posts.

"Dr Mahathir is still Prime Minister and Umno president. I remain his deputy," Abdullah told the packed Press conference at the Umno headquarters in the Putra World Trade Centre.

He said he was overwhelmed and touched by the support of the supreme council for Dr Mahathir's decision.

Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob earlier read the statement, outlining eight points noted by the supreme council which was briefed during the meeting by the party's management committee on its meeting with Dr Mahathir.

The management committee, led by Abdullah, was given the mandate by the party supreme council to meet Dr Mahathir after his surprise announcement to resign from all his party posts followed by the retraction of that decision.

The committee members met Dr Mahathir at Seri Perdana in Putrajaya at 9am on Sunday, just before he left for a holiday in Italy.

The Umno management committee, besides Abdullah and Khalil, comprises the three vice-presidents - Datuk Seri Najib Razak, Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib and Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin - with Wanita chief Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and Youth head Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein.

Khalil said that in the Sunday morning meeting with the management committee, Dr Mahathir expressed his appreciation for the confidence party members and the people had in his ability to continue to lead Umno and the Government.

"But Dr Mahathir has decided that he will retire and relinquish all his posts in Umno, the BN and the Government."

Khalil also said Dr Mahathir would continue to contribute his energy and ideas for the benefit of Umno.

"Dr Mahathir wants all Umno members to continue to work together and strengthen the party to ensure Umno's success in its struggle," he said.

Also present at the Press conference were party vice-presidents who expressed their support and respect for Dr Mahathir's decision on his resignation and the transition of power as well as for Abdullah as his successor.

They agreed that the time-frame would remove all uncertainties and speculation arising from Dr Mahathir's decision.

Najib said that he fully supported and respected Dr Mahathir's wish to step down while allowing for an orderly transition of power.

Muhammad paid tribute to Dr Mahathir's outstanding statemanship, saying that a leader like him was hard to come by, "not in a thousand years".

He said that he and his colleagues in the council had confidence in Abdullah as Dr Mahathir's successor.

"He had proven his leadership qualities when we met the Prime Minister at Seri Perdana."

Muhyiddin said he respected Dr Mahathir's decision and thanked him for making the sacrifice to continue leading the country despite wanting to step down to spend more time with his family.

Rafidah said the time-frame offered by Dr Mahathir was important for continuity in administration as well as policies. Wanita Umno, she said, would give its support to Dr Mahathir and Abdullah.

Hishammuddin said he valued Dr Mahathir's willingness to listen to the committee's pleas for him to continue leading the country. "I will ensure that Umno Youth will give undivided support during the transition period," he said.

Immediately after the Press conference, Abdullah chaired the Barisan Nasional supreme council meeting at which he briefed the component party leaders of the Umno supreme council's decision.

The BN supreme council members accepted and respected Dr Mahathir's decision and pledged support for Abdullah as successor, although several of them expressed sadness over Dr Mahathir's resignation and accepted it "with a heavy heart".

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