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English issue not raised (HL)

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - To the surprise of many, the Cabinet in its meeting today did not discuss the use of English to teach Mathematics and Science in schools.

A discussion on this issue was widely expected, as Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi earlier today briefed the Prime Minister on the consensus reached yesterday by Barisan Nasional leaders.

Abdullah met with Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is BN chairman, before the Cabinet meeting in Putrajaya this morning.

Yesterday, Abdullah held a meeting with BN leaders at his office, during which the consensus was reached.

"We are surprised that the Prime Minister did not raise the issue for discussion," a Cabinet member said.

Meanwhile, Ministers and BN party leaders largely chose not to be drawn into discussion.

"I don't want to comment on this," said Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik, who a few days ago engaged in a battle of words with People's Progressive Party chief Datuk M. Kayveas over Gerakan's opposition to the proposal.

However, it is learnt that Dr Mahathir is expected to meet the leaders of the BN Chinese-based parties in a week or two to resolve the issue.

It is also learnt that the BN component parties' consensus was based on a proposal from the BN Chinese parties for the two subjects to be taught in English in secondary schools only.

Following yesterday's meeting, a follow-up meeting between the BN leaders and Dr Mahathir was expected today.

This did not materialise. Dr Mahathir was said to have told the Cabinet that he would discuss the issue at a later date and in a different forum.

MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, who last week was made the spokesman for the Chinese-based parties on the issue, had no comment.

At yesterday's meeting between Abdullah and the BN leaders, Abdullah made clear that conflicting statements from them would only lead to further confusion and misunderstanding.

The Chinese-based parties in the BN comprise the MCA, Gerakan, Sarawak United People's Party, Sabah Progressive Party and Liberal Democratic Party.

After the Cabinet meeting today, Dr Mahathir joined the Ministers for lunch, after which he chaired a three-hour pre-Budget meeting.

Meanwhile, Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhammad Taib, when asked on the BN consensus, which runs contrary to the Government's proposal, said any consensus reached by BN parties must be firmly guided by the principle of bilingualism.

"The Government has decided to listen to all the feedback it receives. "There is nothing wrong with adjusting to certain needs, as long as it stresses the importance of bilingualism."

Muhammad said Malays had to be proficient in English to participate internationally.

"We cannot afford to be monolingual. We cannot be trapped by beliefs of the 60s or 70s. We have to be driven by the needs of the present," he added.

Muhammad said the party had put its trust in the Prime Minister's and Deputy Prime Minister's leadership to resolve the issue.

Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Abdul Razak, who is also Umno vice-president, said Umno would discuss the BN consensus.

He said Umno needed to study all aspects of the proposal but emphasised that for the moment, the party was leaving the matter to Dr Mahathir and Abdullah.