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PM: Jamaludin will help with task

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PETALING JAYA, Tues. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said he had appointed a second Finance Minister to ease his heavy burden in managing the country's economy and finances.

The Prime Minister and Finance Minister said the many responsibilities necessitated the appointment of Datuk Dr Jamaludin Jarjis.

"There is lots of work at the ministry, with streams of people wanting to see me and documents to read ...so having a second Finance Minister will relieve me a bit of this, but I will still be responsible," he said in his first comment since appointing the Rompin MP and former Tenaga Nasional chairman to the post last week.

Dr Mahathir also appointed Datuk Tengku Adnan Tengku Mansor as Minister in the Prime Minister's Department and promoted Information Ministry Parliamentary Secretary Datuk Zainudin Maidin to Deputy Minister in the same ministry.

To a suggestion that some viewed the appointments as a prelude to a major Cabinet reshuffle, Dr Mahathir quipped: "Not some but it was actually the Press," which drew laughter from those present.

He was speaking at a Press conference at the Royal Malaysian Air Force base in Subang upon his return from Paris where he attended the Pledging Conference for the Reconstruction of Lebanon.

On the possibility of Jamaludin being appointed Umno treasurer, Dr Mahathir, who is party president, said there were no such plans as the Finance Minister would not necessarily assume the responsibility for managing the party's coffers.

"Previously when Daim (Tun Daim Zainuddin) was the treasurer, Anwar (Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim) was the Finance Minister. I did not make any changes (then)."

Dr Mahathir said God willing he would serve as party treasurer until his scheduled retirement in October.

The Prime Minister was also asked about his remarks on Australia and whether the response from a few leaders Down Under would do anything to improve relations.

He said: "Certainly they are not doing anything to improve relations. After all, Australia is not a safe place. The Japanese feel it is unsafe and they have issued a travel advisory to their citizens against visiting Australia, so the pot should not call the kettle black."

In an interview with Greg Sheridan, foreign editor of The Australian newspaper, Dr Mahathir had said Australia "has gone too far" in identifying itself with the United States' aims and tactics in the war on terror.

On his view that Australia had to choose whether to be an Asian or Western country, the Prime Minister felt the republic would be welcomed by Asian nations if it wanted to be fully Asian.

"If it chooses to become a fully Asian country, stops giving advice to everybody assuming it knows better about the countries than they know about themselves, I think we will welcome them.

"It is a big change for Australia, (but) don't think they can achieve that, they are the deputy sheriff..."

On whether Malaysia's sentiments about Australia were shared by other Asian countries, Dr Mahathir said he spoke only for Malaysia and did not wish to impose his views on others.

To a call from an Australian Labor Party spokesman that he should cease criticising Australia, the Prime Minister replied: "We (can) also ask them to stop saying things about Malaysia. We say less than what Australia has been saying about us ...that I am a dictator, authoritarian and so on."

To a question on hill slope development, Dr Mahathir said the Government would study the problems, noting that not all areas had similar topography and soil condition.

"Some places have certain weaknesses, so we must develop the ability to determine the type of soil suitable for development."

On claims that the Ampang Jaya Municipal Council had been untactful and insensitive in handling the evacuation of residents affected by landslide in Taman Hillview, Dr Mahathir said the council was in a difficult position, what more with the attention given by the Press.

To another question, he said Malaysia was "sympathetic" towards Singapore which had been exploiting tourism products in Malaysia, saying the republic did not have much to offer.

Dr Mahathir also responded to criticism by the Opposition that the Government's decision to purchase the Global Express jet for the use of the Prime Minister was a waste of money.

Dismissing it as a nonissue, he said a lot of time would be wasted if he was to depend on commercial flights to travel overseas.

"Perhaps, it could be four times more than using the jet. I will be in the air for a longer period which means a long holiday for me. But using our own jet, I can go and come back fast, come home earlier to work so that people can't say I makan gaji buta (earning a pay without working)."

For instance, Dr Mahathir said today's flight was the first non-stop from London to Kuala Lumpur he had taken using the jet, remarking that there was still ample fuel left after the 13-hour flight.

"To the Opposition, they will turn everything into an issue. They have nothing else to do because whatever good that's supposed to be done has had been carried out by the Government."

On the possibility of the Barisan Nasional introducing a written code of ethics to prevent component party leaders hopping from one party to another, Dr Mahathir, who is BN chairman, said the matter would be studied carefully.

BN secretary-general Datuk Mohamed Rahmat is reported to have proposed the move at the coalition's supreme council meeting in January, saying there is a need for it as partyhopping involving State Assemblymen and MPs was a serious problem especially in Sabah, Sarawak and Penang.

Umno vice-president Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin described the proposed anti-hopping regulations as an appropriate move, reasoning that BN elected representatives should be loyal to their own party and uphold its policies.