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English after school hours (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik claimed today that Chinese-based parties in the Barisan Nasional were proposing that national-type Chinese schools be exempted from the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English during normal school hours.

Dr Ling said the Chinese-based parties in BN would propose that Science and Mathematics be taught in English outside normal schooling hours for national-type Chinese primary schools.

However, he said the use of Mandarin to teach the subjects during the normal timetable should be retained.

Dr Ling said the proposal was brought up during yesterday's BN supreme council meeting and the Chinese-based parties had asked for one week to fine-tune the proposal.

Dr Ling's statement coincided with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad saying that reforming Malaysia's education system and taking steps to preserve the country's fragile multi-racial peace were his top priorities before stepping down next October.

Dr Mahathir, speaking to foreign journalists at his Putrajaya office yesterday as reported by the Singapore Straits Times, said one of his pressing concerns was education reform, namely pushing through his proposal to introduce English as a medium of instruction for Mathematics and Science in primary schools from January.

Although the proposal had drawn fire from some groups within the ruling coalition, he was undeterred and asserted that like the rest of the world, Malaysia would have "to go with the times" and promote the use of English.

In Kota Kinabalu, one of the five Chinese-based parties in BN, the Liberal Democratic Party, said today it would not join the other four to further discuss the teaching of Science and Mathematics in English.

LDP president Datuk Chong Kah Kiat said the decision was in line with the party's stand to support whatever decision is made by the Federal Cabinet on the matter.

"We are leaving it to the Federal Cabinet to decide. I don't see a need for us to have any further discussions," Chong, who is Sabah Chief Minister, said.

Chong, who was represented at the BN meeting in Kuala Lumpur yesterday is deputy Datuk Lau Ngan Siew, said he was told that Dr Ling had asked for the Chinese-based parties to be given a week to further discuss the matter.

What probably needed to be discussed, said Chong, was the question of implementation in Chinese primary schools as there might be some variations and modifications.

The BN supreme council reached a consensus that English would be used to teach the two subjects in all primary schools beginning next year, with some modifications for national-type Chinese schools.

Dr Mahathir, who is BN chairman, after chairing the meeting, said the Chinese-based parties had asked for a week to decide on these modifications.

He said the five parties - MCA, Gerakan, Sarawak United People's Party, Sabah Progressive Party and LDP - would report to him any modification or counter-proposal they might have.

On whether both subjects would be taught in both languages, Dr Ling said: "Maybe. The medium of instruction for Science and Math

ematics will be in Mandarin but we will find ways to have extra classes in English."

The Transport Minister said this before chairing the post-Cabinet meeting here today.

The Chinese-based parties were getting feedback on the feasibility of the proposal from headmasters and educational experts, but Dr Ling refused to disclose who these "experts" were.

On whether the parties would also gather feedback from Chinese educationist groups, he said these organisations had nothing to do with the parties. "We make up our minds based on investigations."

Asked if the proposal to hold extra classes had been agreed to by the BN supreme council, Dr Ling repeated that it was just a proposal and the Chinese-based parties had asked for one week to fine-tune the idea.

The MCA central committee had on Friday unanimously decided to oppose the Government's proposal while the Gerakan CC also did the same on Aug 17.