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Mahathir-Retire

MAHATHIR REAFFIRMS DECISION TO STEP DOWN IN OCTOBER

By: Wan A Hulaimi

PARIS, Nov 23 (Bernama) -- "My decision to step down in October is final," Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told a gathering of the Malaysian community here.

"It'll not be good for the country and the party if I change my mind," he said on Friday.

"Will you retire completely?" a student asked.

"No, I shall only be without a post. I shall continue to work for Barisan Nasional and the government so that it will remain successful. It is not as if I shall make a complete retreat. It'll be very difficult to do that," he said.

Pressed by another young student whether he would change his mind, he said "No, you can rest assured that I will not change my mind."

The evening with the prime minister was a rare treat for the Malaysian community here, which, according to ambassador Tunku Datuk Nazihah Tunku Mohamed Rus, stands at 600 strong.

It was an extraordinary evening of good natured banter, with Dr Mahathir, looking more relaxed than he had ever been in years, holding court with an audience comprising mostly young, and also not-so-young veterans of European life, and the tone of admiration sounded mostly genuine.

"Our country has succeeded, but not to the extent that I'd like to see," he continued.

He regretted that there were still disparities among the races, but Malaysia had made it to the top of the developing countries, he said.

Fuelled perhaps by the sumptuous "buka puasa" Malaysian meal served by the ambassador at her residence, the Rumah Malaysia in the upmarket arrondissement, the questions raised were mostly of a personal nature, with many expressing regret that an era was coming to an end.

The prime minister's aides had to hold back the crowd when they surged forward to touch him as soon as he appeared at the appointed time of 8.30pm.

"How do you manage to keep in such good health?" came another question.

The answer was "moderation =- always do things in moderation."

"When I was eating the lovely meal served by the ambassador here tonight, I was tempted to eat more, but I told myself no, I mustn't over indulge," he said.

And then another piece of advice to the young: "Also choose your parents well," before he continued on a more serious note.

He said the failure of the national schools was a matter of concern.

"The Chinese do not send their children to our national schools because they say there's too much language issue there, the Indians too want to teach their children in their own language, and the Malays send their children to religious schools."

To remedy this, the government was devising a plan to bring the young together, maybe for six months, so that they could get to know one another, he said.

"One idea suggested by (social activist) Tan Sri Lee Lam Thye is for us to introduce the national service," he said.

Dr Mahathir, who is here for a one-day meeting of 18 countries for the reconstruction of Lebanon at the Elysee Palace on Saturday under the auspices of French President Jacques Chirac, was mobbed again by the

admiring crowd when he was leaving the marquee.

Many came with bits of paper for him to sign. A local staff from the Malaysian embassy here asked him to sign the name tag stuck to her jumper, another lady produced photographs from his previous visits here for him to autograph, while the rest waited patiently to pose with the prime minister for a photograph.

One local restaurateur, a Malaysian of Chinese origin, was seen trying to repair a disposable camera that was producing a loud whirring sound each time its rewind mechanism was twirled.

"I think I know why it is making such a loud noise," he said. "It's because it's not made in Malaysia."

-- BERNAMA

WAH LES JK