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`Yes, I'll continue as PM' (HL)

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SUBANG, Wed. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad returned from his holiday abroad this morning, and reiterated in no uncertain terms his intention to step down from all but one of his political and Government posts next year.

Elaborating on the Umno supreme council announcement last week, Dr Mahathir said he, however, wished to remain as the Member of Parliament for Kubang Pasu, a position he has held since 1978.

Dr Mahathir's aircraft touched down about 7.40am at the Royal Malaysian Air Force air base in Subang, where a large crowd of Barisan Nasional members and well-wishers had gathered since dawn.

Looking relaxed in a dark blue sports shirt under a dark double-breasted jacket, the Prime Minister was the first to alight from the aircraft, followed by his wife, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali. The crowd on the tarmac, comprising mainly Cabinet Ministers, other senior political leaders and close friends, cheered when Dr Mahathir appeared at the airplane's doorway.

There were more cheers and shouts of "Hidup Mahathir" when he shook hands with his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. A light aircraft flew over the air base trailing a banner that read: "Dr Mahathir - kepulanganmu dinanti" (Dr Mahathir - we await your return).

On June 22, in his winding-up speech on the final day of the Umno annual assembly, Dr Mahathir shocked the nation when he announced his intention to resign from all political and Government posts.

He was unable to finish his speech when stunned Umno supreme council members rushed to persuade him to withdraw his announcement.

On June 25, the supreme council announced that Dr Mahathir had withdrawn his resignation and would continue to serve as Prime Minister until October next year. The council also announced that Dr Mahathir had named Abdullah as his successor.

Dr Mahathir's return was much awaited as the nation wanted to hear his confirmation of the supreme council's announcements.

At a packed Press conference soon after touchdown, Dr Mahathir was immediately asked to explain his decision to step down.

He said: "Actually, I was unable to complete my statement. My intention was to let go of all Umno and Barisan Nasional positions that I am holding, and I only wanted to remain as Kubang Pasu MP.

"I also wanted to resign from all positions in the Government, as the Prime Minister, Finance Minister and all other posts. I wanted to state my intention to continue to work for Umno to further strengthen the party. That was the original statement that I wanted to make but I was unable to."

Asked whether he would assume an advisory post after his resignation, the Prime Minister said he would not.

He said: "I've made it very clear that when I leave, I leave completely. I am not going to hold any position either in the party or in the Government, but it is my duty to support the party ... to support the Government."

The Prime Minister also thanked the rakyat for their support. "I have enjoyed their strong support and I think it is my duty to provide the same strong support to my successor," he said.

Asked why he chose the Umno general assembly to make his announcement,

the Umno president said it was the best forum for him to do so. Revealing that he had much earlier spoken to several party leaders, including Abdullah, Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob and friends about his intention to resign, Dr Mahathir said they kept asking him to continue.

He stressed that if he had been able to finish his winding-up speech, he would have completed his announcement, including naming Abdullah as his successor.

On whether he would seek re-election in the general election scheduled for 2004, Dr Mahathir would only say that he would think about it when the time came.

Asked whether the 16-month transition was too long and whether there would be two Prime Ministers during this period, Dr Mahathir said the question of two Prime Ministers should not arise.

He said the party leaders had assured him that there would not be any power struggle or unpleasant developments in the party during the transition period.

"I initially agreed to stay for a month, but Abdullah and other Umno leaders met me at Seri Perdana and I then decided to stay on until October next year."

He said he was persuaded to remain as Prime Minister so that he could chair the Non-Aligned Movement and Organisation of Islamic Conference to be hosted by Malaysia next year.

Asked why he wanted to resign from all his posts, Dr Mahathir said he had served the party and the nation for 21 years, a period that was far too long for a Prime Minister.

"I had wanted to resign after the Commonwealth Games in 1998, but as we were facing economic problems, I postponed my intention," he said.

Dr Mahathir said he also had the responsibility of ensuring that the party, having gone through a turbulent period in 1998 and 1999, regained strength.

"If I had left when the party was weak, I would be shirking my responsibility," he said.

As for his duties during the next 16 months, the Prime Minister said he would ensure all party policies were adhered to and several tasks in Government were completed.

Asked why he was overwhelmed by emotion when announcing his resignation, Dr Mahathir said:

"Parting is always a sad thing. Having been with the party for 21 years as the Prime Minister and president of the party, and having associated almost my whole or three-quarters of my lifetime with the party, of course I felt rather sad..."

"Also it is an admission that I'm getting old so people get a little bit emotional," he said to the laughter of those present.

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