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PM won't be around for another election battle

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DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's decision not to contest the next general election was the story of the week with the vernacular newspapers frontpaging the issue yesterday.

The Berita Harian quoted the Prime Minister, slated to hand over duties to his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi next October, as saying that he would continue to ensure that the people were not taken in by Opposition claims.

Speaking at a meet-the-people session at the Sultan Abdul Hamid College in Alor Star on Friday, Dr Mahathir, who has been Kubang Pasu MP since 1974, said he would campaign very hard for the Barisan Nasional in the polls scheduled for 2004.

The Utusan Malaysia went on to quote the Prime Minister as saying that he hoped the people would not make a mistake when choosing the next Government.

He told the audience at the school, where his father was the first principal in 1908, that the beliefs of those who had been fooled should be corrected so that they would not be cheated.

The Prime Minister's statement saw Umno vice-president Datuk Seri Najib Razak saying that the former's views should be respected.

Speaking to reporters, the Defence Minister and most senior Umno vice-president was quoted as saying that Dr Mahathir's decision should be accepted even though the people wanted him to continue leading the nation. He hoped that Dr Mahathir would continue to guide the people and Umno in a capacity which would enable him to do so.

Meanwhile, the Berita Harian on Friday reported that the Singapore Manpower Ministry had refused to approve a work permit for lawyer Karpal Singh to represent four young girls fighting a ban on tudung (headscarf) in schools in the republic.

Singapore did not provide a reason for the decision, it quoted Karpal who wanted to represent Khairah Faroukh of Primary 1/3, Eunus Primary School, Siti Farwirah Mohamed Kassim of Primary 1.4 Chongzhen Primary School, Nurul Nasihah Mohd Nasser of Primary 1D, White Sands Primary School and Sheila Zulkifli of Secondary 2D, Tanjung Katong Girls School as saying.

Yesterday, however, the newspaper shed more light on the issue by quoting a Singapore Government statement that said Karpal was not allowed to represent the students as it felt he was trying to interfere in domestic affairs of the country.

The republic accused Karpal, who obtained his law degree from Singapore, of trying to further his own agenda in his attempt to offer legal counsel to the girls.

Karpal had applied for the work permit through Sadari Masuri & Partners, a Singaporean law firm.

Singapore introduced a ban on headscarves in schools earlier this year while continuing to allow Sikhs boys to wear turbans in schools.

The Utusan Malaysia touched on an unusual development last week which showed the effect of the nation's dependence on illegal immigrants.

It quoted a Nestle spokesman as saying that sales of Maggi Mee and Milo had fallen drastically since the expiry of the general amnesty on illegal immigrants which saw thousands returning to Indonesia.

