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Truce until Indera Kayangan (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Top MCA leaders from opposing factions have agreed to bury the hatchet until the Indera Kayangan by-election, and have pledged to Barisan Nasional chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that they will work together to retain the seat.

Dr Mahathir confirmed that he had had separate meetings with MCA president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik and with Ling's deputy Datuk Lim Ah Lek who was accompanied by vice-president Datuk Chua Jui Meng, Youth chief Datuk Ong Tee Keat and central committee member Datuk Wong Mook Leong yesterday.

"They gave an undertaking to put aside their differences and concentrate on ensuring a BN victory in Indera Kayangan," he said (See Page 4).

Dr Mahathir reiterated the need for them to put aside their differences for the benefit of the party and Barisan Nasional.

"I have solved the problem; there is no problem. I advised them to forget about the differences among them and to focus on ensuring that the BN candidate wins the by-election, and they have agreed.

"The differences - we will discuss later," he said, adding that the truce was a good start in resolving the party's internal dispute.

Dr Mahathir was speaking to the media after attending the People's Progressive Party's 2002 New Year open house at the Putra World Trade Centre this afternoon.

The Prime Minister said the leaders also have no dispute over the list of candidates which was submitted to him for consideration.

Dr Mahathir said he would study the candidates' list and make a decision soon.

To a question on the number of shortlisted candidates, he said in jest, "Nearly 5,000 to 6,000."

Meanwhile in an exclusive interview with Bernama, Dr Mahathir said he needed a Finance Minister or at least a second Finance Minister to help him manage the country's economy.

"If not to take over from me as Finance Minister, then maybe as my assistant. We used to have a second Finance Minister; it's also possible. This is an approach that we will choose because the duties of the Finance Minister are very heavy," said Dr Mahathir, who took over as Finance Minister after Tun Daim Zainuddin resigned on June 1 last year.

Dr Mahathir felt that the duties of Finance Minister were a big burden on him because he had also to shoulder the responsibilities of the Prime Minister. He said he had to find someone "truly suitable" for the job.

During the interview Dr Mahathir spoke at length on United States-Malaysia relations. He expressed the hope that the ties would improve under President George W. Bush.

He said the Malaysian Government did not have any problem with the Bush administration.

"The previous US administration (under President Bill Clinton) directly criticised us. In fact, Vice-President Al Gore came here and encouraged certain people to topple the Government.

"But the present Government in the US does not do this. It is, therefore, easier for us to have communication with the new Government," he said.

On the Middle East crisis, he said any settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict depended on the major powers of the world.

"As long as the major powers give face to Israel, there will be no settlement," he said.

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