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PM: Leave it to Abdullah (HL)

Zubaidah Abu Bakar; Sharanjit Singh; Firdaus Abdullah

JITRA, Fri. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said although he has no objection to Umno vice-president and Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak being appointed Deputy Prime Minister, it would be up to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to name his deputy after taking over as Prime Minister.

Asked if he was proposing that Najib be appointed Deputy Prime Minister and Umno deputy president, Dr Mahathir said that Umno and the Government had their process of succession.

He said when the president withdraws in Umno, the next person in line would assume the top leadership. In Government, when the Prime Minister withdraws, the person who leads the biggest party, in this case the Barisan Nasional, would become the Prime Minister.

"So when I withdraw, Pak Lah (Abdullah) will become the Prime Minister.

"It is up to Abdullah to form the Government and choose his Cabinet members," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Umno's deputy president was decided by members but whom Abdullah chooses as Deputy Prime Minister should also be deputy Umno president.

"This was what happened to me and I am confident this is a good practice.

"I am just imagining that maybe Najib can become Deputy Prime Minister when I withdraw, but it is up to Abdullah to choose who should be his deputy," he added.

Asked if he was endorsing Najib as the future Deputy Prime Minister, Dr Mahathir said: "Let's say I have no objections."

He had made a statement on Tuesday referring to Najib succeeding Abdullah as Deputy Prime Minister.

On whether he would inform Umno members about it, he replied: "Well, I'm telling you already."

Asked how other Umno vice-presidents would react to such an endorsement, Dr Mahathir said: "I don't know... whoever is chosen, whether Najib or anybody, they have given an undertaking there will be no (power) struggle and they won't go around trying to pull each other down."

Najib, Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib are Umno vice-presidents.

Dr Mahathir was speaking to reporters after laying the foundation stone for the new Kubang Pasu District complex near here.

Present were his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Syed Razak Syed Zain, Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim and Umno secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob.

Earlier, Dr Mahathir was also briefed on the progress of the nearby RM30 million Dewan Wawasan which houses nine Olympic-standard badminton courts, a library and auditorium.

Dr Mahathir was also asked if he would appoint a Finance Minister soon and replied that he was still thinking about it.

Asked if he planned to make any changes affecting the ringgit during his final 16 months in office, Dr Mahathir said: "We don't want the ringgit to be like a yo-yo... It makes it difficult for people to do business."

He added that Malaysia could still trade and had recorded good export volume despite the ringgit peg and the higher value of other currencies.

In Putrajaya, Abdullah said the public need not speculate on who the

next Deputy Prime Minister would be for the moment.

"This issue need not be blown up now because we have to continue to enhance co-operation and it will be another 16 months before I take over as the party and government leader," he added.

He said Umno leaders must now be focused on enhancing co-operation within the party and among themselves.

"A decision on the matter cannot be avoided but the Prime Minister is still here, the party leaders are still here and I have my duties and the vice-presidents too have their respective duties and responsibilities," Abdullah told reporters after receiving visiting South Korean Construction and Transport Minister Lim In-Taik at his office here.

He said a decision would be made but the co-operation must continue.

"We must remain friends," he said when asked to comment on Dr Mahathir's statement on Tuesday.

To another question, Abdullah said there were no internal squabbles and that he was satisfied with the level of co-operation shown by all three Umno vice-presidents.

Asked if a definite succession formula was ready, he said the first rule of the formula was to ensure co-operation and unity.

"Secondly, party interest must be put before individual interests.

"If this prevails then we will be united and strong, but if this is clouded by personal agendas then co-operation will be affected," he added.

Abdullah said that in-fighting would only result in Umno losing its political clout, denying whoever led the party any important role in nation-building.

"We need to work together. The question of position is something which will be decided when the time comes," he reiterated.