

Mahathir: Thank you, Malaysians

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PUTRAJAYA: Hours before stepping down as the fourth Prime Minister, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad extended his heartfelt gratitude to Malaysians who have made his 22-year leadership possible and hoped they would continue to live in peace and harmony.

"I want to thank all those who sent greetings and cards to me and my wife. I am not able to reply to them personally, so I hope this way I can thank all of them, including schools which have organised all kinds of activities to show their thanks and appreciation to me.

"All this gave me the utmost satisfaction because to me, this is the best reward than anything else, the appreciation and thanks expressed by the people," he said at a press conference yesterday, hours before handing over the leadership to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Also present was his wife Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali.

The press conference started on a subdued note as Dr Mahathir tried to control his emotions while Dr Siti Hasmah kept glancing at her husband. When journalists started asking questions, he regained his composure.

He also thanked the civil servants, police, armed forces, Cabinet members and political parties for their co-operation in helping him to run the country.

Dr Mahathir hoped the co-operation given to him would be extended to Abdullah.

"I pray that the people will always live in peace and harmony as well as prosperity."

The Prime Minister also said that a lot of burden had been lifted off his shoulder.

"I think a burden has been lifted because I would not have to deal with requests which I know I cannot help, things that I cannot give which are not mine to give and the kind of pressure and demands made which I think will be wrong for me to do, all kind of things. At the moment I feel relief."

Asked whether he was satisfied with his achievements while in office, Dr Mahathir said: "Fully satisfied, I will never be. There are many things that we could have done, but I have to accept that although we tried our best, there are limitations to what we can do.

"On that score I am satisfied but the fact remains that there are many other things that I could have done when I was the Prime Minister."

He also said that when he started out there were a lot of doubts among the non-Malays who labelled him as "ultra."

"But at the end of my career as Prime Minister, I find I have been able to remove this doubt.

They support me as much as they can and that is something I feel is very satisfying."

On his immediate retirement plan, Dr Mahathir said he would leave for a vacation abroad today.

"I'll take things as they come. And I may be writing my experiences with the hope that they

could be useful to others."

Asked whether he saw himself continuing to be vocal, Dr Mahathir said: "It depends on the occasion.

I must admit that I have received many invitations to speak and as the occasion arises, I will give my frank opinion about things."