

31 OCT 2003

Mahathir-Gratitude

DR MAHATHIR BIDS FAREWELL, THANKS NATION AND PEOPLE

PUTRAJAYA, Oct 31 (Bernama) -- On his final day as the fourth Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today delivered a heartfelt message of gratitude to Malaysians from all walks of life for supporting him during the good and bad times throughout his 22 years at the helm of the nation.

Speaking at his final media conference here before bowing out, Dr Mahathir said he managed to weather some challenging times during his stewardship of the country due to the support of the rakyat.

Dr Mahathir said that it gave him great satisfaction to receive all the thank you notes and letters of appreciation for his contributions to the country.

"Such gestures of appreciation and gratitude make me feel a sense of satisfaction and all these extended to me in return are greater than any other," he said at the half-hour media conference. Dr Mahathir was accompanied by Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali.

Asked about his feelings barely hours from handing over the mantle to his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Dr Mahathir said he felt relief that the "burden" of leading the country was about to be removed from his shoulder.

Dr Mahathir was composed throughout the session although at times he appeared to be trying to keep his emotions under control, prompting glances from Dr Siti Hasmah who was sitting beside him.

Asked about her feelings on her husband's retirement, the Malaysian First Lady said that she too felt relieved and in jest, thanked the rakyat for "returning" her husband to her.

Admitting that he felt a tinge of sadness, Dr Mahathir said the fact was that he had been the Prime minister for too long and it would be good to have a change in the country.

The session was dominated by questions which were personal in nature rather than the usual political and economic matters.

Queried on how he seemed to keep his feelings in check in the face of difficult situations, Dr Mahathir said: "Of course I look calm but my brain is spinning because I think all the time."

Touching on his immediate plans after retirement, the 78-year-old Kedahan said that he would leave for a vacation abroad tomorrow.

"I'll take things as they come. And I may be writing my experiences with the hope that they could be useful to others," he said.

Asked whether he saw himself continuing to be vocal, Dr Mahathir said: "It depends on the occasion. I must admit that I receive many invitations to speak and as the occasion arises, I will give my frank opinion about things."

Dr Mahathir also said that he was happy that Malaysia was now better known internationally and even though people do not agree with its voice, they would not ignore it either.

Asked where he would celebrate Hari Raya this year, he said that it was yet to be decided.

"This is the first time after 22 years that I will be celebrating without having to work on that day," he quipped.

After the media conference, Dr Mahathir was mobbed by journalists seeking his autograph and wanting to take pictures with him.

The same thing happened after Friday prayers at the nearby Masjid Putra

where the congregation did not miss the opportunity to shake hands with Dr Mahathir.

-- BERNAMA

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