

17 FEB 2003

NAM-Mahathir (Chair)

MALAYSIA CONFIDENT ABOUT LEADING NAM

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 17 (Bernama) -- Malaysia is confident about leading the 114-member Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) for the next three years, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

"We feel quite confident that we can lead NAM for the next three years," he said when asked on South African President Thabo Mbeki's statement that Kuala Lumpur is well placed to take over the movement's chairmanship.

Dr Mahathir said this at a media conference after witnessing a dry-run for the NAM Summit opening ceremony at the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) here.

Mbeki was reported as saying that South Africa was glad that Malaysia was able to host the summit and that Dr Mahathir could provide the leadership required for the movement to face current challenges.

Mbeki will hand over the Chair to Dr Mahathir at the 13th NAM Summit, which will be held from Feb 20 to 25 at the PWTC.

Malaysia will chair the movement for three years, until the convening of the 14th summit.

Dr Mahathir was also asked on Singapore Foreign Minister S. Jayakumar's remark describing him as an "entertaining story-teller" after his disclosure that his Singapore counterpart, Goh Chok Tong, did not agree to the construction of a new bridge to replace the Causeway because of Goh's nostalgia over the Causeway.

"It doesn't matter, that is his comment," said Dr Mahathir.

When pointed out that it was a never ending story on Malaysia-Singapore bilateral relations, Dr Mahathir said: "Yeah...but I'm not going to continue the story."

On Friday, during a working visit to Johor, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would proceed with the construction of the new bridge on the Johor side despite the lack of cooperation from Singapore.

He also revealed that he was informed by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew that Goh was not in favour of the project.

"Because he (Goh) has a sense of nostalgia over the Causeway, he (Lee) said that we (Malaysia and Singapore) can construct the bridge after Goh Chok Tong's retirement..this is what he (Lee) told me," Dr Mahathir said.

On a proposal that the Umno general assembly scheduled for this June be postponed to October, Dr Mahathir said: "I do not see any reason for us to postpone the assembly until October."

Columnist Awang Selamat, in his Mingguan Malaysia "Bisik-bisik Mingguan" column yesterday, suggested that the Umno general assembly be postponed until October.

Awang Selamat said this would allow Umno to organise a very meaningful farewell for its leader who is also a respected leader of the country.

Dr Mahathir has announced that he will relinquish all his government and party posts in October, after the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) Summit, which Kuala Lumpur will host.

He has named Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as his successor.

-- BERNAMA

HS MFJ YBY