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EVENTFUL 100 DAYS IN OFFICE FOR ABDULLAH

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PUTRAJAYA, Feb 7 (Bernama) -- Events have been unfolding thick and fast since Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi assumed the country's leadership 100 days ago and, taking them all in his stride, the Prime Minister has shown that he is ready for more.

Since taking over from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Oct 31 last year, which saw the former prime minister leaving office after 22 years at the helm, Abdullah has been scurrying to all the four corners of the nation to meet the people and has thrown in a familiarisation tour of Asean capitals for good measure.

And the reception for Malaysia's new leader either in the country or overseas has been overwhelming.

In a recent interview with newspaper editors as the 100-day mark neared, Abdullah said it had been a good three months and he was encouraged by the support from Malaysians.

And in what must be music to the ears of the people, the 64-year-old has described himself as the number one servant of the nation, ready to be at their service.

In his first comments as prime minister on his return to his home state of Penang on Nov 1 last year, Abdullah expressed gratitude to the Almighty for inheriting an effective government and a country which stood out as one of the more developed of developing nations, thanks to the leadership of Dr Mahathir.

Abdullah chaired his first Cabinet meeting on Nov 5 and made his maiden speech as Prime Minister in the Dewan Rakyat two days earlier.

After the Cabinet meeting, he told a news conference about his pledge to fight corruption and reduce government bureaucracy in an effort to improve the public delivery system.

He directed ministers to set up a task force at their respective

ministries to improve procedures with the hope that a top-rate service could be delivered to the people, especially frontline departments and agencies dealing with the public on a regular basis.

This theme has been repeated by Abdullah on many occasions and to show that he meant business, he once popped up at the Immigration Department to check on the quality of service there, to the surprise and delight of many.

The Prime Minister went on to announce a slew of policy initiatives which have been equally well-received by the public.

He advocated, among others, prudent fiscal policies and management of public spending; a reform of the police force; enhancing transparency and instilling good corporate governance; and turning agriculture into a major component of the country's economy.

However, Abdullah said, policy changes would be made in the country only when the need arose and it would not be for personal glory.

One of his major moves is to establish the Special Commission to Enhance the Operations and Management of the Royal Malaysia Police headed by former Chief Justice Tun Dzaiddin Abdullah and tasked to look into ways to transform the police into a credible force.

Mindful of the need to help the needy, the government has allocated RM200 million to provide tuition vouchers for poor primary school pupils in Years Four, Five and Six beginning this year.

The scheme would enable pupils from poor families to receive tuition from government school teachers in four subjects -- English, Bahasa Melayu, Science and Mathematics.

Abdullah has put his prudent public spending stance to the test with the postponement of the RM14.5 billion double-tracking railway project, saying that there are other pressing socio-economic development projects under the Eighth Malaysia Plan.

In addition, he has directed state governments to ensure that the development costs of projects in their states do not exceed the allocations under the Plan.

The Prime Minister also has to grapple with social issues pervading the society like the increase in the number of rape cases as well as horrific crashes on the nation's roads.

He had a taste of handling negative foreign reports about Malaysia when he dismissed a United States government write-up accusing Malaysia of favouring certain religions.

But what set the nation abuzz was Abdullah's maiden Cabinet reshuffle on Jan 7 which saw him appointing Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak as Deputy Prime Minister.

His choice was greeted with overwhelming support as Najib pledged undivided loyalty to the Number 1 man in the country.

In comments made in connection with Abdullah's 100 days in power, the Pahang-born politician praised the Prime Minister's excellent administration, saying that his dynamism as a leader was reflected by the policies and decisions he had made so far.

Abdullah also made Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin the Agriculture Minister, Tan Sri Nor Mohamed Yakcop the Second Finance Minister, Datuk Dr Jamaludin Jarjis the Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister and Datuk Dr Effendi Norwawi the Special Functions Minister.

The next big question that is keeping the nation guessing is when Abdullah will call for the next general election which many believe is just around the corner.

He also left an impact on his trips abroad, starting with his attendance at the Asean-Japan Commemorative Summit in December and subsequent stops at Asean capitals last month. He is yet to make a visit to Myanmar.

Abdullah's trip to Singapore probably yielded the biggest surprise when Malaysia and the island republic agreed to try and resolve outstanding bilateral issues through dialogue rather than third party arbitration.

Relations between the two Asean neighbours have previously soured over issues such as the price of Malaysian raw water sold to Singapore and the construction of a bridge to replace the causeway currently linking the two

countries.

Although full of elan, Abdullah's 100 days in office was tinged with sadness when his mother, Datuk Kailan Hassan, died last Monday.

When he first went back to Penang after becoming Prime Minister, the newspapers carried a touching picture of Abdullah kissing the hand of his proud mother.

It has been reported that Kailan used to tell her eldest son to perform his duties well and to refrain from self-aggrandisement -- an advice that all Malaysians can take to heart.

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