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Mahathir-Government

I AM NOT BOTHERING THE GOVERNMENT, SAYS TUN DR MAHATHIR

By: Jackson Sawatan

SINGAPORE, Aug 18 (Bernama) -- Former Malaysian prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has dismissed the notion that he was still "pulling the strings" in the current administration but said that he had to come out in the open when he was drawn into an issue.

"I'm a retired person," he said in an interview with Asian television news channel, Channel NewsAsia (CNA), on its "One On One" interview programme.

"Not true at all. I made a resolution on stepping down that I would not bother the government unless of course somehow or other, whatever I am doing...like the present Proton issue...I was drawn into it," he said in the 30-minute interview aired last night.

Elaborating on the Proton controversy, Dr Mahathir, who is Proton advisor, said he took a protective stand of the national car as it was facing an unfair competition.

Dr Mahathir had alleged that the uncontrolled issuance of Approved Permits (APs ) to import cars by the International Trade and Industry Ministry had caused the entry of relatively cheap foreign-made cars into the country as well as the malpractice of under-declaration which had jeopardised the sales of the national car.

The former prime minister had also questioned why the APs were monopolised by certain bumiputera businessmen.

As a result of his remarks, the Prime Minister's Office issued a list of AP recipients between 2004 and 2005.

International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, who came out in defence of the manner in which the APs were issued, came under fire from Umno delegates at the recent Umno general assembly.

At one stage, there were calls for Rafidah to apologise to Dr Mahathir over the issue and more recently, a call for her to resign from the post.

Asked in the CNA interview about how serious his exchange was with Rafidah, Dr Mahathir said: "Not serious...I only want the facts to be known because I claim that the issuance of APs has got a damaging effect on Proton because it creates an unfair competition".

"I'm not asking for an apology. All I'm asking is to give the facts and figures," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that Proton would be able to compete with foreign-made cars had the competition been a level playing field.

"For example, these cars are brought into the country and under-declared to the customs so they are very cheap and because of that, they are able to give discounts and promote and sell these cars against Proton."

Proton, on the other hand, was burdened with conditions imposed by the government, he said.

"Proton is asked to develop vendors, to create bumiputera agencies in the country. All these cost a lot of money to Proton and because of this, it is unable to compete on a level playing field with international products.

"If proton is allowed to build the car without regard for whether the components come locally or from elsewhere, if Proton is free from having to support local vendors, free from having to create bumiputera (businesses) then it can compete with international cars, no problem," he said.

When the CNA host asked him whether he would allow foreign companies to

take over Proton, Dr Mahathir said: "(If that is the case) then it will not become a national car".

Not being a national car, it need not carry any burden that is national, he said, adding that the matter was for the government, not him, to decide.

The interview also touched on former deputy prime minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

When Dr Mahathir was asked whether the notion that there was no permanent enemy or permanent ally in politics applied to him and Anwar, Dr Mahathir said: "We haven't come to the stage of impermanency yet".

Anwar, he said, had damaged his reputation beyond repair.

"Anybody writing about me never fails to mention as if I caught him by the scruff of his neck and threw him in jail," he said.

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