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Abdullah happy if graft index improves

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - What would make Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi happy? "When the corruption index improves," was his frank reply.

Speaking in an interview with CNN's Lorraine Hahn in the TalkAsia programme, the Prime Minister reiterated the Government's commitment to fighting graft, adding that it was an issue frequently discussed by the Cabinet.

Indicating the National Integrity Plan as the most recent step taken to combat corruption in Malaysia, Abdullah said: "We continue to remind civil servants and the people (to shun corruption). This is a subject I always talk about. It is also a subject my other colleagues in the Cabinet talk about.

"I will be happy when the corruption index improves," he said in the interview in Putrajaya.

In Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index for 2003, Malaysia with a score of 5.2 ranked 37th out of 133 countries and fifth among Asian countries, after Singapore, Hong Kong, Japan and Taiwan.

Abdullah expressed confidence that his Government's fight against corruption would be successful, with such initiatives as the National Integrity Plan and the newly-established National Institute for Ethics.

Asked "how far he was willing to go ... without fear or favour", the Prime Minister replied: "That's what I promised everybody, without fear, without favour. If a case has to be brought to court, we will bring it to court. But I have always said it is important to make sure that justice is at all times maintained."

Asked to comment on his retention of several of former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Ministers in his Cabinet, which was said to have drawn disappointment from some people, Abdullah said performance had been his principal criterion in their selection.

He pointed out that there were many new faces among the deputy ministers, as they had to be brought in early to prepare them to serve the nation in the future.

"That's important. We have to introduce them to the process of change, because when we come to the year 2020, these new ones will be in the frontline.

"They will be the decision-makers.

"Their decisions will decide the future of Malaysia beyond 2020."

On his priorities, Abdullah said he was attending to the improvement of the public service delivery system, as it was important to lower the cost of doing business and to make the country more competitive.

"It will also provide some satisfaction to people who demand quick and quality service," he said.

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