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PM uncertain about Caracas G15, speculation on polls rises

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi may not attend the G15 meeting in Caracas, Venezuela, next week, further fuelling speculation that a general election may be just around the corner.

However, Abdullah today declined to confirm reports that he would not be attending the meeting.

When met after launching the National Service programme in Kuala Kubu Baru, Abdullah said he had yet to confirm his attendance at the summit of developing nations. "It is still a long time to go till the 26th," he said. "We still have time to decide."

His aides, including special assistant Zaki Zahid, and journalists have already left for Caracas, reminiscent of the situation just before the 1999 general election, when then Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad pulled out of a scheduled trip to South Africa.

Dr Mahathir's aides, including Press secretary Datuk Zakaria Wahab, had arrived in South Africa for the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting when he cancelled at the last minute and within a few days, dissolved Parliament for the general election.

Officials from the Prime Minister's Department could not confirm whether Abdullah's trip to Caracas had been called off, but said he had a very tight schedule of meetings with Barisan Nasional and state leaders over the next few weeks.

These meetings, and the full-day visits to all States by both the Prime Minister and his deputy, Datuk Seri Najib Razak, over the last two weeks, have led to intensified speculation that the general election is near.

This month alone, Abdullah has visited Pahang, Johor, Perak, Sarawak and Terengganu, and held meetings with BN Menteris Besar and Chief Ministers in Putrajaya. He also chaired the BN supreme council meeting two weeks ago.

A postponed meeting with BN MPs and State Assemblymen in Kota Kinabalu on March 3 is likely soon. Najib is also expected to meet BN leaders on Feb 29.

The general election need not be called until November, but many Umno leaders have indicated a preference to have it coincide with the Sabah elections, which must be called by April 12.