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Abdullah's two major challenges (HL)

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CYBERJAYA, Mon. - The SARS scare and the ban on the Iban Bible were two of the "most challenging" issues that Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had to tackle in his two months as acting Prime Minister.

Abdullah, who assumed the acting Prime Minister post on March 6, in saying this today, added that although Malaysia was not adversely affected by SARS, it was a problem that had to be dealt with quickly and firmly.

"We formed a Cabinet sub-committee on this with Datuk Chua Jui Meng as the head and immediate measures were put in place such as screening people coming into the country at all entry points to stop them from bringing the virus in," he said in response to questions on his stint as acting Prime Minister.

Even then, he said, there were still cases of people suspected of suffering from SARS emerging in other parts of the country.

Explaining the tough measures taken to combat SARS, Abdullah said he had suggested to Chua to have dedicated hospitals to treat those suspected of suffering from the disease so that they would not spread the virus to others. "We do not want to see those suspected of suffering from SARS running to any hospital or from clinic to clinic."

"Everyone is worried about SARS because one can die faster from it than from AIDS."

Abdullah said he was glad that the World Health Organisation had removed Malaysia from the list of countries adversely affected by SARS and although there were still cases of people suffering from SARS, Malaysia was not badly hit.

On the Bup Kudus, Abdullah said he was surprised to be told that the book banned by the Home Ministry was actually a translation of the Bible in Iban.

The ban was announced on April 8 and lifted on April 26 following appeals from several organisations including the Council of Churches and the Bar Council.

Abdullah said the matter could have turned into "a very difficult problem" if immediate measures had not been taken to correct it.

Asked whether his period as acting PM was "on-the-job" training for him to eventually take over the premiership, Abdullah said as far as he was concerned, one should take the opportunity to learn whenever entrusted with a task.

"To me, at anytime, I am always on training. In any job, you must always be prepared to learn. I will remember whatever I have done. If it was good, then it was a good lesson and if it was bad, it was still a lesson," he said.

"I have always enjoyed my work ... since I was a civil servant in 1964," he added.

On a statement yesterday by Second Finance Minister Datuk Jamaludin Jarjis that the International Monetary Fund had invited Malaysia and several other countries for discussions on Iraq's reconstruction, Abdullah said the Government was willing to consider it.

However, Abdullah said the IMF would need to be specific on Malaysia's role.

"This only goes to show the IMF recognises our ability to help in the development of post-war Iraq," he said.

Apart from Malaysia, the IMF has invited the US, Britain, France,

Germany, Japan, Russia and China.

Abdullah said he had also briefed Dr Mahathir earlier today on the economic stimulus package draft and the Prime Minister would announce the measures once he had gone through them.

"It is only a draft. It is to give the Prime Minister the opportunity to inject some ideas before the package is announced," he added.