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`No Cabinet reshuffle till I go' (HL)

Ramlan Said; Kamarul Yunus

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said there will not be any Cabinet reshuffle before he steps down in October.

He said the position of Transport Minister Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik, who has tendered an undated resignation letter last Aug 15, might be decided by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi when he takes over the country's leadership.

Dr Mahathir also said Abdullah would be acting Prime Minister when he (Dr Mahathir) goes on a two-month leave after the Non-Aligned Movement Summit at the end of the month.

"Yes, the two-month leave is confirmed ... it is part of the pact for me to stay on until October. And Abdullah will be the acting Prime Minister during that period."

In jest, Dr Mahathir said although he might be in the country during the leave, he did not envisage meeting the Press. "Don't ask me any question because I will not know anything."

Dr Mahathir announced his resignation from the Government at the end of the Umno general assembly last June but was persuaded to stay on until October.

The Prime Minister was speaking after launching the 13th NAM Summit commemorative coins, stamps and first day covers and a book on Malaysia's Technical Assistance Programme at the Putra World Trade Centre.

To a suggestion that the decision on the resignation of Dr Ling would be made by Abdullah since there will not be any Cabinet reshuffle before he retires, Dr Mahathir replied: "It is possible. When he is the PM, he will decide. When I resign, I am not asking people to resign too. But actually for the next election, everybody has to resign anyway as you cannot remain as Ministers and stand for election because by that time, the whole Government would have been dissolved."

Dr Mahathir said the country will be run by a caretaker Government and when the new Prime Minister takes over, he will decide on the lineup.

The Prime Minister also confirmed that the general election would not be called before October.

"There is no time for one. You see I'll be on leave in March and April, then in May, June and July, there will be the Umno (general assembly) and others, then we have to prepare for the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference) meeting; we do not have the time."

Asked to comment on the statement by Primary Industries Minister and Gerakan president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik that Cabinet members should also tender their resignations when the Prime Minister steps down, Dr Mahathir replied that it was Dr Lim's own views.

"That's all right, it (the statement) is not binding on others. If I choose to jump into the sea, there is no need for others to follow ...let me jump by myself."

To a contention that a Cabinet should also by convention be dissolved when the chief executive steps down, Dr Mahathir said there was no such practice in Malaysia.

On the signing of a special agreement between Malaysia and Singapore today to bring their claim over Pulau Batu Puteh to the International Court of Justice and the republic's insistence that the Malaysian navy and police had no right to conduct patrols in the area, the Prime Minister

said Malaysia did not recognise the claims.

"We do not recognise until the ICJ rules on the matter. As far as we are concerned, our claim still stands, just like theirs. They are entitled to go to the area they are claiming and we are entitled, too."

The Prime Minister was also asked on US Secretary of State Colin Powell's presentation in the United Nations yesterday which claimed Iraq had breached UN resolutions demanding that it disarm.

Dr Mahathir said: "We did not think it is sufficient or adequate proof for the UN to support an attack on Iraq. Our stand is that the UN must be satisfied, not the US.

"In any case, our belief is that war is not a solution because the cost is too high. How many people are going to be killed merely because you want to change the government of a country?

"If this becomes a precedent, then it is worrisome for every country because if they do not change their governments, it will likely be changed through war."

On whether Malaysia was planning to provide any protection to Iraqis, Dr Mahathir said it did not envisage the Iraqis coming to Malaysia to escape the war.

He said in the event of war, the neighbours of Iraq would have to deal with refugees crossing into their countries to flee the American attack."