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Chairman Sulaiman won't be there due to ill health

UMNO's longest-serving permanent chairman Tun Sulaiman Ninam Shah has written to secretary-general Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob he will not be able to preside over this year's general assembly because he is unwell.

"He is not really in a good state of health to chair the session because it (assembly) is quite intense," he said.

A founder member of Umno, Sulaiman, 85, had been Umno's permanent chairman for the past 26 years.

Khalil said in Sulaiman's absence, his deputy Datuk Seri Onn Ismail would take over as the main chair at the assembly.

To ensure the smooth proceeding of the assembly, Khalil said a temporary assistant would be appointed to help out Onn.

"Despite his ill-health, Sulaiman will still be the chairman until the next party election," he said.

Sulaiman had intended to announce his wish to quit due to health reasons at last year's assembly, but he never got to do so because of the unexpected announcement by party president Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that he would be stepping down.

"We will certainly miss him at this year's assembly, but we hope he would be able to be with us next year," Khalil said.

Sulaiman, who had over the years thrilled delegates with his wit, had been able to perform his duty with excellence owing to his vast experience.

When met at his daughter's house in Petaling Jaya today, Sulaiman said he would be watching the assembly proceedings on television at home.

The former businessman from Johor, who is suffering from myeloid leukaemia (cancer of the blood), said despite being unable to be present physically at Putra World Trade Centre, his heart was with the gathering.

"I am very disappointed for not being able to attend the assembly since it will be the most memorable event as our Prime Minister Dr Mahathir will be retiring in October.

"This will be his last speech as the Umno president," he said.

During the interview he was accompanied by his daughters Datin Faridah, Mariam and Intaan Rogayah, and his son Hassan.

Sulaiman said he would have chaired the assembly if not for his illness as chairing the assembly was a greater responsibility than what he was going through right now.

"My doctor has advised me not to tax myself with too much pressure - so I decided not to chair the assembly.

"It will definitely be a great loss not being able to attend such an important event of my life though," he said.

Asked what he hoped would emerge from the assembly, he said the assembly would focus on the president's speech and all Umno leaders and members should give their undivided support to the party and Dr Mahathir.

"The Prime Minister always stressed on the importance of fighting for and promoting the Malays by the leaders - apart from trying hard to strengthen unity among members.

"I hope Dr Mahathir's advice will be adhered to by all delegates," Sulaiman said.

He also thanked all Umno leaders and members and said he hoped that the assembly would proceed smoothly.