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Don't speculate, DPM tells public

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who will be sworn in as the country's fifth Prime Minister on Friday, today urged the public to stop speculating on the appointment of his deputy.

The Deputy Prime Minister said he was not in a position to speak on the matter.

"I am yet to take over (from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad), how can I say anything? The speculation has, however, started," he said after attending the opening of the People's Progressive Party's 50th general assembly by Dr Mahathir at the Putra World Trade Centre.

Asked if a portrait of Umno vicepresident Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, which was placed under his (Abdullah) at a corner on the fourth floor of the PWTC meant anything, Abdullah, who is also Umno deputy president, said:

"I do not have any influence over how the portraits are drawn or painted. We cannot make any assumption based on paintings."

He said the portraits should not be interpreted in any way as there were also pictures of the two other Umno vice-presidents: Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and Tan Sri Muhammad Muhammad Taib.

"Why are you (reporters) asking me this? The portraits of all three vice-presidents are there. Najib is also drawn with jet-fighters. Why make interpretations from the paintings?"

Asked if he would name his deputy as soon as he was sworn in on Friday, Abdullah said he would wait for the right time.

On a separate matter, Abdullah, who is also Home Minister, said arrangements were being made to bring back the 13 Malaysian students detained in Pakistan for suspected links with militants.

Wisma Putra would work with the Home Ministry and the police to make the arrangements.

Contacted by telephone in Islamabad, Malaysian High Commission spokesman Abdul Ghafar Iskandar said it would probably take about a week for the 13 to return.

He said that this was to facilitate paperwork according to the procedures of the Pakistani Interior and Foreign Ministries.

Ghafar said the Malaysian High Commission was notified of the students' release by the Pakistani Government last week.

Pakistani authorities arrested the Malaysians and five Indonesian students last month on suspicion of being involved in activities of the Jemaah Islamiyah following information obtained from detained JI leader Hambali.

On the establishment of an independent panel of experts to monitor Singapore's land reclamation in the Straits of Johor, Abdullah said: "I would think that they have started the work, they should...there's no need for delay."

On Oct 10 he was reported as saying that the panel should be set up immediately after the conclusion of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference Summit in Putrajaya on Oct 18.

The establishment of the panel formed part of the Oct 8 decision of the International Tribunal on the Law of the Sea in the dispute between Malaysia and Singapore over the latter's reclamation works in the waters off Pulau Tekong and Pulau Tuas in the Straits of Johor.