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Dr Mahathir: Chong asked for leave, not extension

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today refuted suggestions that Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Chong Kah Kiat had asked for his tenure to be extended in a meeting with the Prime Minister recently.

Expressing deep regret and sadness over the allegation, Dr Mahathir said Chong had met him to express his wish to take a month's leave to enable his successor to familiarise himself with the job.

"The allegation is totally untrue. I am very sad such a baseless accusation was made. He came to see me to say he wished to go on leave, not to extend his tenure, not at all.

"I did not hear him say such a thing. All this suspicion is the result of the perception that politicians are all bad people," he said after the launch of the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre at the Mandarin Oriental.

Dr Mahathir, who is also Barisan Nasional chairman, said the Chief Minister's post, which will fall vacant next month following the expiry of Chong's term, will be filled by Umno, based on the rotation system.

The Prime Minister was commenting on the allegation made in Mingguan Malaysia's "Bisik-Bisik Mingguan" column by "Awang Selamat".

Chong, who is the Liberal Democratic Party president, is the sixth leader of the State BN component party to assume the post of Chief Minister under the rotation system, which was introduced in 1994.

The system rotates the Chief Ministership among the leaders of the Muslim Bumiputera, Chinese and non-Muslim Bumiputera communities for a two-year term each.

The Prime Minister said the Government would decide on Chong's successor.

"This is not a case where you can submit an application. There are no application forms ...there is nothing."

On the possibility that the Sabah State election would be held concurrently with the general election, Dr Mahathir said: "Everything is possible ...if it is possible, then there will be a possibility."

On the proposal by the Kelantan and Terengganu Umno liaison committees that election candidates for the two States be determined earlier, Dr Mahathir said: "I have said that I will look into it. If earlier, how much earlier? A year earlier, 10 years earlier, or a day earlier? They are all earlier, relatively."

On Terengganu Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Abdul Hadi Awang's meeting with individuals linked to terrorism and extremism, Dr Mahathir said it was not wrong to meet, but the question was what they were meeting for.

"It is okay to meet people, but we want to know what the meeting was for. If they want to plan violence, of course they will be culpable."

Asked if Hadi would be investigated, he said it was up to the police.

It was reported last week that Hadi attended a meeting of Islamic radicals in Makassar, Sulawesi, in October 2000. Leaders such as Jemaah Islamiyah leader Abu Bakar Ba'asyir and Agus Dwikarna, head of the Laskar Jundullah (Army of Allah), were said to be present.