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Dr M: It's time to move on and pass the job to someone else

Ahmad A. Talib

EVEN overseas students ask Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad what many others have been asking: "You are still healthy, so why must you retire?"

As he had answered others, the Prime Minister told his audience, made up of Malaysian students in France, yesterday: "I may be healthy but I have been Prime Minister for too long.

"It's time I move on and pass the job to someone else."

The students, studying in southern France, joined him for breakfast at the end of his two-day working visit to Monaco.

Later, asked why the same question kept cropping up even after he had repeatedly said his decision was final, Dr Mahathir said: "Some people just cannot accept the fact that I would be stepping down when I am at the top."

Speaking to Malaysian journalists at Hotel Hermitage, Dr Mahathir said he was not about to change his mind.

"If I do, my credibility will be gone."

Asked if he had a definite day when he would retire, the Prime Minister said: "It will be in October. I have the OIC and then Apec in Bangkok. It will be on the last day of October."

Dr Mahathir said Pas was adamant that he would not step down as planned.

"They say he (Dr Mahathir) will not let go his post. They have been wrong in their prediction many times and yet they predicted again.

"Every time we present the Budget, they say it is an election budget.

But this time (Budget 2004), their prediction will be true."

The Prime Minister reiterated that he had wanted to retire last year but deferred it following appeals from many quarters.

Dr Mahathir said he had to attend the Apec meeting as his Thai counterpart, Thaksin Shinawatra, wanted him to come as Prime Minister.

On queries from the students who wanted to know whether all government policies would continue under Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Dr Mahathir said he was confident his successor would not change them.

"Many people think that all government decisions are made by me, which is not true. They are made collectively by the Cabinet."

The Prime Minister said Abdullah had given a commitment that he would continue with existing policies.

"So, I don't see there will be much changes except in the leadership style."