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PM expresses confidence (HL)

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PENANG, Sat. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today expressed confidence that the new MCA leaders will strengthen unity in the party.

Though new president Datuk Seri Ong Ka Ting and his deputy Datuk Chan Kong Choy are young, they have vast experience serving the party and the Government, he said.

He said the Barisan Nasional readily accepted their appointments and hoped they would strengthen the party, which was embroiled in a leadership crisis for some time.

Yesterday, the MCA central committee elected Ong and Chan after failing to persuade former president Datuk Seri Dr Ling Liong Sik and exdeputy president Datuk Seri Lim Ah Lek to reconsider their resignations.

Dr Ling, head of the Team A faction, and Lim, who led Team B, quit simultaneously at the start of the central committee meeting yesterday.

The leadership change follows a long-drawn-out dispute that had spilt the party into two teams.

"We accept this as an internal problem in the MCA and we do not recognise any Team A, B, C or D," Dr Mahathir said.

"We accept Ong's and Chan's appointment. That is the MCA's decision because to us, there is no two MCA. There is only one (MCA). We do not recognise (teams) A or B.

"What we know now, there is one new president for MCA and one new deputy president for MCA. To us, this is MCA," he said after a private discussion with Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei, who is here on a three-day working visit.

Asked about Dr Ling's position as Transport Minister, Dr Mahathir said: "That, we see first."

Asked if the appointment of Ong and Chan meant that MCA could be considered free of "gangsters", as alleged by Youth chief Datuk Ong Tee Keat, Dr Mahathir said: "I have no knowledge (of this). I meet them often but I don't see any gangster. I don't know, tell, if you know any."

Asked if the next general election, which is not due until November next year, could be held earlier, he replied: "We can do so if you want it fast, we will expedite it. If you want it delayed, we will delay it."

Asked if his retirement in October would be followed by the general election, he said it was up to the new Prime Minister to decide. "When I retire, it is no longer my responsibility. Ask Pak Lah (his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi). Why ask me?"