

# Dr M takes over Rural

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today he was taking charge of the Rural Development Ministry portfolio following the resignation of its Minister Encik Ghafar Baba from the Cabinet last month.

Asked by reporters whether he would make changes to the Cabinet, Dr Mahathir said: "There is plenty of time ... there is no need to rush."

He was speaking at a Press conference after opening the Koperasi Usaha Bersatu (KUB) 13th annual general meeting in Subang, near here.

Dr Mahathir said there was no problem in the matter. "We (Cabinet) all can do our work as a team."

Asked whether he had the opportunity to meet with Ghafar, Dr Mahathir said he had not had the chance.

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He is not in the country ... I hope to meet him in the near future," he said.

On his absence at the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation meeting in Seattle, Dr Mahathir said he had no regrets.

"I am quite happy as you can see," said Dr Mahathir, who was in a jovial mood when he responded to a question from a *New York Times* journalist.

He said the Australians seemed to be offended because he did not go.

"I don't understand why ... I mean the condemnation against me as a person just because I didn't go ... I just don't understand these Australians," he said.

Asked what would have made him go to Seattle, Dr Mahathir said there must be some change in the attitude towards the EAEC.

"And Apec should stay as

it was when it was proposed as a loose organisation with projects and programmes to carry out," he added.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would continue with the efforts to explain to other countries, especially the United States, on why they should agree with the EAEC.

"We will continue to do so until we achieve our objective. It may take sometime. We will use whatever way possible," he said.

Asked whether countries such as the US understood Malaysia's explanation, Dr Mahathir said: "I think it is impossible for them not to understand, especially after years of explanation and very clear explanation."

"I don't think they cannot understand. It is just that they don't want to accept EAEC because they (US) are not in.

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I can't imagine the US being an Asian country and for that reason they cannot be a member of EAEC," he said.

Asked whether he could have accomplished more by attending the Apec meeting, Dr Mahathir said even if he had gone, it would not have made much difference.

He said there was a move to turn Apec into an institutionalised counterpart of the European Community and develop it into a free trade area.

"That is not what Apec is all about. As far as we are concerned, the relationship between Apec and EAEC had been determined and there should not be a misunderstanding," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the Bill Clinton administration was more accommodating than the previous George Bush government but apparently

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this was not enough to convince the Japanese that they should support the EAEC.

Asked whether he had been in contact with Clinton, the Prime Minister said he had written to him on various occasions and the President had also written to him on various occasions.

"For example, on Bosnia, I wrote to him to appeal that the US act and President Clinton had written to explain the US policy on Somalia and to thank our troops for rescuing the US forces," he said.

Asked what were his views of the reports that more Americans were regarding Asia now as an important place, Dr Mahathir said it all depended on the reasons the Americans were doing so.

"If it was merely in order to have a share of the econo-

my, dynamism and market potential, I think that would be rather narrow.

"They should focus on Asia because the region is an important part of the world and you accept that its people have as much rights as the Americans or Europeans and not regard Asia as some rather strange group of people who have values and culture which are different which you think should be converted to your own values and system," he said.

Asked whether there was a major difference between the attitude of the Clinton and Bush administrations, Dr Mahathir said there was some difference.

"Still the difference is not big enough. The present administration is still thinking of security threats, implying that China is about to go to war with us, Malaysia.

"We don't look at China as a potential enemy. We look at China as a country that has great potential to become an economic power and with greater wealth. I am quite sure they will spend some money to upgrade their military which is normal in any country."

Asked on his views on the American condemnation of China, Dr Mahathir said: "Now I have become especially cynical. By comparison to what the Serbs are doing to the Bosnians, the Chinese can be regarded as almost gentle."

"And yet the criticism against China is out of proportion and the unwillingness to do anything about the Serbs who cut people's throats and rape women, makes nonsense of the US claims that they are concerned about human rights," Dr Mahathir said.