

Mahathir testifies in pepper spray case
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Former Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad today made a rare appearance in court under heavy security to testify against a suspect accused of attacking him last year.

Mahathir was assaulted with pepper spray as he was about to address a crowd of some 1,500 people shortly after arriving in Kelantan for a political tour last July (photo).

Mahathir, who is locked in a bitter dispute with the new government of Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, arrived in the court house guarded by at least 100 security officials.

The accused, Nik Sapeia Nik Yusoff, 53, is a former state leader of the ruling Umno which Mahathir led for 22 years until he stepped down in October 2003.

Mahathir told the packed magistrate's court that he was informed by his bodyguard that Nik Sapeia, a businessman, had allegedly attacked him with the spray.

"I have never experienced this before. Initially I thought it was tear gas fired by the police.

"As I entered the car (to address the crowd) I suddenly felt weak and could not breath. My nose was clogged and I felt pain in my throat and I could not speak," he said during his hour-long testimony.

Mahathir also said that he knew Nik Sapeia, who was seated in the dock, for almost 20 years and regarded him as a friend.

If convicted, Nik Sapeia could face a maximum three years' jail or a fine, or both.

Mahathir has attacked the Abdullah administration for months, levelling accusations of economic mismanagement, nepotism and corruption.

The former leader has been accused of fomenting a split in Umno with his strident attacks on the new administration that have raised fears of political instability.

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