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Khaled

Cabinet members pledge to defend Government

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KUALA LUMPUR: Cabinet members pledged yesterday that they would come forward to the defence of the Government against attacks from former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

They will also answer all allegations concerning their respective ministries.

The decision was made during the weekly Cabinet meeting during which discussions in the closing stages turned to Dr Mahathir's blistering attacks on the Government and its policies.

Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Seri Nazri Aziz said this was the unanimous decision at the meeting.

"Every Cabinet Minister has the authority to defend the Government and its decisions. We have to defend ourselves against attacks from anyone. The attacks are against decisions made by the Cabinet.

"It is not my sole responsibility. What is for sure is that we will not allow the Prime Minister to reply," he said at his post-Cabinet Press conference at the Parliament lobby.

Nazri, who voiced a scathing response to the tirade on Monday, said the Cabinet meeting which

discussed a range of issues, only discussed Dr Mahathir's attack towards the end when the agenda touched on matters arising.

Nazri said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi did not criticise him nor chide him for his remarks on Monday.

"Nobody criticised me," he said when asked if any of his colleagues had taken exception to his attack on Dr Mahathir.

"The Cabinet felt that if I felt insulted by Tun's remark, it was my right to defend myself, my colleagues, my Prime Minister and my Government," he said.

Nazri said those who had called on him to stop criticising Dr Mahathir should also give the same advice to the former Prime Minister.

"They should also give the same advice to Tun Dr Mahathir. Don't just ask us what we can do, ask him what he can do too," he added.

On Dr Mahathir's claim that he did not know the Opposition would be present at a gathering last Saturday during which the former Prime Minister continued with his broadside, Nazri said he found it unacceptable.

"I want to say he knew from the beginning the person who organised the programme was Ibrahim Ali. I think he should be alert and sharp enough to know that Ibrahim fought us in the last elec-

tion," he said, referring to former deputy minister Datuk Seri Ibrahim Ah, who was sacked from Umno two years ago for disciplinary breach.

Nazri said Dr Mahathir being a seasoned politician should have realised that Ibrahim would have invited the Opposition.

"To say he just came and shook hands and did not invite them is unacceptable. I cannot accept that he did not know Pas would be there.

"My Cabinet colleagues and I all feel it is an Opposition platform," said Nazri.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, who is on an official trip abroad said the solid support behind Abdullah was crucial as Dr Mahathir's attack on the Prime Minister's leadership had "exceeded the limits of criticisms".

He said the Cabinet could not settle for a vague show of support but had to pledge support openly.

"He has insulted the Government and the party with all sorts of allegations which are not fair nor just.

"We (Cabinet members) are all members of Abdullah's Government and we will back our leader. If we do not stand by him, the Government's credibility will be at stake.

"As for me, I will take the bullet for the Prime Minister... I have al-

ways done this," said Syed Hamid who is one of the ministers to answer Dr Mahathir's allegations.

Syed Hamid said he was told by his colleagues about the decision, adding that the explanation on the bridge issue raised by Dr Mahathir was discussed at length during the Cabinet meeting.

Syed Hamid said, however, he was certain that Dr Mahathir was not looking for answers.

"He is not interested with the answers ... we do not want to throw insults."

He said Dr Mahathir's attack on the Abdullah administration was personal.

This he said was evident in the points and ways Dr Mahathir expressed his views.

"On one side his attacks were personal... It shows hatred. He (Dr Mahathir) has undermined Umno and the Government.

"We are the elected ones and the rakyat is our responsibility," he said.

Entrepreneur and Co-operative Development Minister Datuk Mohd Khaled Nordin said all ministers were unanimous in that Abdullah did not have to answer to the criticisms by Dr Mahathir.

"We do not agree that Pak Lah answers the criticisms (hurled by Tun Dr Mahathir), the ministers will answer the questions. This is exactly what we will be doing from now on."