

PM: I will see it through

Abdullah: Fight against corruption is a priority

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During the two-hour interview with local editors including WONG SULONG and WONG CHUN WAI, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi spoke on a wide range of issues from corruption to the bird flu outbreak in the region. Below are excerpts of the interview at the Finance Ministry in Putrajaya.

On corruption

GOVERNMENT officers, especially the Muslims, must show their same abhorrence against corruption as they do against certain forbidden practices of the religion.

He said Muslims should make a vow not to accept bribes because it was sinful, adding that there must be a natural form of self-denial.

"For example, they do not want to take pork or its by-products; why don't they accept the same kind of attitude and self-denial? If they do, then there will be no graft," he said.

Abdullah said since assuming the post of Prime Minister three months ago, he had made the fight against corruption as one of his priorities.

He said he did not want Malaysians to develop a culture where money had to be given to resolve matters, adding "this is a potentially serious problem, we don't want it."

Abdullah said he had directed the various government agencies, especially those with the frontline desk, to cut down on red-tape as "delays breed corruption."

Asked whether corruption had reached a level where it was about to become a Malaysian culture or whether it was already so, he replied: "Neither of the two. The fact is that it exists in any place but we cannot allow it to be expanded."

When it was pointed out by newsmen that corruption appears rampant in the police force, Abdullah said he had "heard of such stories" and that was one reason why the Royal Commission of Inquiry on the police force was formed.

He said when delays took place, the public would "become impatient and they are prepared to jump queue." He said the fight against corruption in the civil service would focus on departments dealing with the public and those with powers to issue licences and permits as they were most susceptible to corruption.

Abdullah said corruption took place, not just in the civil service, but also in the private sector and that "we must get rid of it" as it added to the cost of doing businesses.

On the performance of the civil service, he said the capabilities of government officers, especially in dealing with the public, should match the first-class facilities and buildings that they enjoyed in Putrajaya.

"I would like to see top class officers in terms of capabilities, innovation,



MAIN CONCERNS: Abdullah talking to editors about his plans at the Finance Ministry in Putrajaya yesterday. On his left is Information Minister Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob. — Bernamapic

efficiency, dedication and talents. All this will be wasted if we do not have this ... just first class facilities and third class mentality," he said.

He also said that special "flying squads" had been formed to resolve the backlog of land transactions nationwide, adding that the Chief Secretary had been directed to give priority to places like Penang, Selangor, Kedah and Perak.

The Land and Cooperative Development Ministry has also deployed a special squad to investigate the RM300mil land scam in Selangor, of which a Land and Mines Department junior staff was charged in the Sessions Court for tampering with the department's computerised land ownership database.

Malaysia-Singapore relations

IT'S time for Malaysia and Singapore to go back to the negotiation table to end the deadlock of contentious issues affecting both sides, Abdullah said.

"The mood is good. They are ready to talk and we are ready to talk. I have no problem working with the Singaporeans," he said, adding that the informal meetings on Jan 24 and 25 had created an atmosphere where they could sit down and talk.

He said the issues affecting both sides should not be discussed as "one package" as it would complicate efforts to resolve these issues.

"Let's deal with the less difficult ones first and address the difficult ones later," saying there were disadvantages in trying to solve the problems if there were "too many things in the package."

On Jan 24, Singapore leaders attended a Chinese New Year gathering in Johor Baru and the following day, Singapore played host to the Malaysian Cabinet members where they socialised. They played golf and visited the Asian Civilisations Museum before they lunched at Sentosa.

Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong had stated "our approach has been to enhance and strengthen our

personal relationship first" while Abdullah said "this has been an excellent opportunity to socialise and meet our friends here."

Both leaders said that having personal relationships would help deal with bilateral issues. Some of the outstanding issues include the supply of water from Johor, which revolves around price and how it is calculated; Malaysian railway land in Singapore; and the relocation of the customs, immigration and quarantine facilities in Tanjung Pagar.

The "feel good" sentiment in Malaysia:

ABDULLAH deeply appreciates the positive response from Malaysians towards his leadership since taking over the country's top post three months ago.

"I am happy that I have managed to bring about a positive reaction and confidence in the Government. We are doing things to improve our services; they can expect better services."

"We have certainly created a good feeling and confidence in what the Government can do for them. These came in the form of appointments, reshuffle (in the Cabinet) and certain announcements."

"I know the expectations are high. I know there is readiness to support and welcome these changes. I have a duty to deliver what I have promised, they are not just populist approaches," he added.

Abdullah said the pledges made during the last three months would be on his agenda, adding that he was aware that people had asked whether action would follow.

He also said there was a "high comfort level" as far as race relations were concerned, adding that the country's racial, cultural and religious diversity was an asset to Malaysia.

Abdullah said he noticed the large number of non-Malays during the Hari Raya gatherings and the equally large crowds of Malay at the Chinese New Year gatherings.

"Malaysians are at ease, at home and happy. We are sensitive to the feelings of each other and it is certainly a step forward," he added.

He said previously, Muslims would eat at one table and non-Muslims at another table despite travelling "in the same car to the same function" but now the same food was served to all the guests.

On the general election:

ABDULLAH dropped a hint that the general election would not be held in March as some had speculated - he would be travelling to Teheran and Caracas at the end of this month.

He confirmed that he would be attending a conference on developing aid in Teheran, Iran and the Group of 15 Summit on Feb 27 and 28 in Caracas, Venezuela.

Asked whether he would postpone these trips at the last minute, he replied with a smile: "Trips can be postponed for various reasons."

Abdullah said many people had offered him all kinds of advice on the elections including calls that he should hold the elections soon to take advantage of the "feel good" atmosphere towards his leadership and that no one could predict whether the world economy would affect Malaysia.

Others, he said, suggested that he would hold the elections only at the end of 2004 to secure a bigger landslide for the Barisan Nasional but said he had listened to "genuine advice from the attic and from the ground."

Turning to the newsmen, he asked: "Do you think this is the best time? I am still watching the situation."

On bird flu:

THE Government will be transparent and honest in dealing with the bird flu virus outbreak with Abdullah promising that it would not hide anything.

He said the integrity of the Government was important and that it would "not play around" with matters affecting public health, adding all measures had been taken.