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SANDAKAN, July 23 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad spoke today of the need for all the people in the country to think of themselves as Malaysians and not in terms of which state they came from.

The Minister said that in this way they could serve the interests of the nation and make the world respect Malaysia as a nation that was progressive, peaceful and prosperous. The people of Sabah should consider themselves Malaysians no different from those in the other states and have love for their country, he said to thousands of people who turned up at the airport here to welcome him to Sandakan.

The Prime Minister, who arrived by an RMAF jet for a one-day visit, was accompanied by Datuk Seri Datin Paduka Dr. Siti Hasmah, senior federal officers and several entrepreneurs.

Chief Minister Datuk Harris Salleh and Datin Rubiah also accompanied the Prime Minister from Labuan. -- more

Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir also reminded the people of the need to work hard to develop their state and nation. Development would not come about on its own but be achieved for and the benefits would eventually be enjoyed by the people themselves.

In this regard, he said, the state governments must be administered by leaders who were dedicated. Sabah was fortunate in that it was led by a government that wanted to develop the state and the people and because of this, there is development everywhere. +

Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir said that from the development projects planned and implemented by the Sabah government, it was certain that the people would benefit a lot. -- more

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The Prime Minister said that though Sabah was far from Kuala Lumpur, the Federal Government was always giving due attention to the development of the state and the welfare of the people.

He said the Federal Government had set aside allocations for various development projects, including the Sandakan Airport complex project.

He added that the Federal Government had identified several roads which would be taken over by the Federal authorities for upgrading so that in future the people of Sabah could travel from one town to another on good roads.

However, he said the people in the state should be patient as the country was now facing an economic recession.

Seri Dr. Mahathir also recalled his first visit to Sandakan with the late Tun Abdul Razak in 1965 when the place was just a small town. -- more

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Sandakan was now not only the second biggest town in Sabah but had also become an important development and commercial centre of the state and country, he added.

He said that rapid development was going on here, with the rich and poor -- playing their roles.

The Minister also said he was happy to meet the people of Sandakan again and said he hoped to visit the place more often.

Earlier, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir and his delegation arrived to a warm welcome, which included kompong groups and bunga manggar bearers.

Before leaving for Labuan, they were seen off by Federal Territory Minister Datuk Shahrir Abdul Samad, his deputy Encik Ahmad Shah Tambakau, Deputy National and Rural Development Minister Haji Yahya Lampong, Kuala Lumpur Datuk Bandar Datuk Dr. Elyas Omar and local dignitaries. -- Bernama