

Dr M's challenge to Opposition

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By Ahmad A. Talib

ALOR STAR, Thurs. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today offered the country's toll highways to an Opposition-inspired committee on condition that they operate these expressways free of charge and maintain them without public funding.

The Prime Minister said the Government was willing to consider handing over the North-South Highway and other such roads to the anti-toll committee set up by Datuk Haji Harun Idris of Semangat 46 and Dr Syed Hussein Ali of Parti Rakyat Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir said huge funds were needed to build

and maintain these expressways and the Government had to tax the people to subsidise their construction.

But if the Opposition think they can build and maintain these expensive highways without taxing

□ THE ROAD TO SUCCESS: P3

the people or charging toll on the users, they should be given the opportunity to do so.

He said the Government had to allow toll to be collected because it did not want to tax the people further and to enable the

revenue from taxation to be used for other public purposes.

The Prime Minister said it was also reasonable for highway users to share some of the expenses.

He made the offer at a gathering of padi farmers and officers of the National Padi and Rice Authority from all over the country at Megat Dewa, 38 kilometres north of here.

He was accompanied by his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali.

Speaking to newsmen later, Dr Mahathir said the Government had received a letter from the committee urging it to review the imposition of toll.

Perhaps the Datuk

Harun-Syed Hussein Ali Inc could show everyone how some of the country's highways could be managed without toll collection, Dr Mahathir remarked to the laughter of the huge crowd.

He told reporters that the anti-toll committee's request was merely an election ploy. The committee members believed that they could take the credit by forcing the Government to remove the toll.

The crowd had gathered early in the morning to welcome the Prime Minister who flew in from Penang where he officially opened the \$60 million Hotel Equatorial yesterday.

After delivering his 50-

minute speech, Dr Mahathir, accompanied by the farmer, gave away certificates to farmers who sold the highest amount of padi to the LPN and took a ride on a harvester for ceremonial padi harvesting to symbolise the close cooperation between Government leaders and its agencies and the farmers.

He added that the agriculture sector had been modernised and made more efficient over the years through modern approaches and methods. This has helped farmers to improve their quality of life. At the same time, this has also helped raise the standard of living in the country.