

M'sia aims to produce commodities more efficiently: Mahathir

By HARDEV KAUR

MALAYSIA will not move out of primary commodities — natural rubber, tin and palm oil — but will aim to produce them more efficiently using less labour, according to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Currently, he said, tapping of rubber is "terribly inefficient. It requires too many people. What we should be doing is to tap rubber trees by merely turning on a switch in the morning". He added that this is not such a "fantastic idea" as the Rubber Research Institute has done some work on it.

Asked on the need to develop greater indigenous capacity to innovate, technology, to adjust and reverse engineering, he said it is possible but stressed the need for a change of attitude among researchers and engineers. "There must be a greater willingness to innovate and not to follow, to do the things only the way it has always been done."

In a special programme over RTM last night the Prime Minister also spoke of the need to improve management techniques, especially in view of the country's desire to improve technology. Stressing the importance of management, he said one can buy technology and raise capital, but warned that failure to manage will make one's venture fail.

Asked to explain his stand on the newly industrialised country (NIC) classification, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said there is no reason why a country that is growing up fast should suddenly be labelled an NIC.

"Developed countries will force

you to revalue your currency to make you less competitive. They will examine your human rights record, labour movements and the environment ... all of which are designed to stifle your growth so that you cannot compete with them," he said.

He criticised developed countries for putting such a classification which only allowed themselves to make money and for their workers to earn more so as not to allow the less developed countries to catch up with them.

"They failed to do this with Japan. They didn't realise it, suddenly Japan was with them. But they are going to make sure that no other country will achieve Japan's status," he added.

He stressed that the country must prepare for the day when it will lose its Generalised System of Preferences (GSP) status which allows certain exports to enter the markets of the industrialised countries mostly duty-free.

"We have to prepare ourselves for the worse. Obviously people are going to take away our privileges like GSPs and all that. We can only do that by being more efficient," he said, adding that Malaysia needed the GSP to be able to compete in the initial stages. But if the privilege is taken away too soon, it may not have the resilience to overcome the problem.

On Malaysia's economic performance, the Prime Minister said it will continue to record good performance in the coming years provided everyone works

hard, improves efficiency and accepts plans designed to steer the economy positively ahead.

While the prospects are good Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir stressed that a lot depends on us, especially on how the Government assesses the world situation and also how other countries, particularly Malaysia's trading partners, perform. There is no doubt that a number of our major trading partners are going into recession, if they are not already in a recession, he said.

If other countries are not doing well then it will affect our economy. "If they are not doing well, obviously they are not going to buy much from us and that will effect our economy. Therefore, we would want them to perform well. But sometimes they too, like us, find it difficult to control the performance of their economy.

"But at home we are masters of ourselves. So if we arrange things properly, if we continue to be productive, to be efficient, if we are willing to work hard, if we are willing to accept programmes that are designed to keep the economy on the right track, I am quite sure we can weather this although I do think our performance this year and the next few years will not be as good as last year," he added.

Asked on the tight labour market and the pressure for increased wages, the Prime Minister explained that the Government would "like to see wages rise but they must be accompanied by greater productivity". Rising wages is not in itself a problem, he added, but rising wages without better productivity is a problem.

On human resource development, the Prime Minister said in preparation for the future, graduates, on leaving the universities, "should spend a lot of time learning the ropes and not take on the top jobs which some of them expect".

He cited the example of Japan where graduates begin on the assembly line before they become executives. This, he said, is a good philosophy as it helps to develop good work ethics and to create better understanding between the graduates and their eventual subordinates.

"But here, because of demands and expectations of these people, it has been very difficult to persuade them that they should begin from the bottom," the Prime Minister said.

Greater stress is now being put on vocational subjects rather than pure academic subjects like history, geography. "That is why we have introduced subjects such as living skills in schools because we have to live in a more industrialised environment. There are certain skills which are needed, for example, understanding of mechanical things, electronic things, trading, transactions.

"We are going to stress management, we are going to stress technical subjects that are more relevant to an industrialised society rather than an agrarian society," he said.