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Thatcher-Mahathir (With Pix)

THATCHER PAYS GLOWING TRIBUTE TO MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, Sept. 3 (Bernama) -- Former British Prime Minister Lady Margaret Thatcher today paid glowing tribute to Prime Minister Datuk Dr Mahathir Mohamad, whom she described as a truly remarkable national leader who had brought Malaysia to the forefront of both regional and world affairs.

"Few leaders earn the title of statesman. But in Prime Minister Mahathir's case, there is no doubt that the accolade has been won by his achievements," she said.

She was addressing more than 500 corporate executives at the Hotel Istana here. Her talk on the theme "Towards Asian Leadership" was organised by Citibank.

Thatcher, on a three-day visit to Malaysia, said there could be no more challenging place for her to give a speech than Malaysia because Dr Mahathir himself "is one of the world's most formidable and trenchant speech-makers".

No matter how difficult the issue, Dr Mahathir never shrank from giving leadership, one which involved many lonely decisions, but he had never faltered or ducked them, she added. -- more

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"The result is that Malaysia has been able to provide its people with very much higher living standards while at the same time assuming a world role as a spokesman for Southeast Asia," she said in her 30-minute speech which was followed by a 30-minute question and answer session.

"You will find in history that it is not necessarily the biggest countries who exert the most influence, it is those with the strongest leadership and clearest vision -- and it is those qualities in their Prime Minister which have propelled Malaysia in a very brief time to its present fortunate position," she added.

Thatcher said Malaysia had achieved an economic miracle which was not produced by miracles but instead by determination, hard work and right policies for growth.

"You have also built the Proton car which is selling very well in Britain. Indeed, I am told that when Dr Mahathir travels in Britain, he passes the time by counting the number of Protons on our streets," she said amidst laughter from the audience. -- more

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She also praised Finance Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim for pursuing prudent monetary and fiscal policies and for making Malaysia such an open financial centre.

"If Finance Ministers could be transferred like star football players, I could think of several very much larger countries who would pay astronomic fees to get him," she said.

Thatcher recalled that her relations with Dr Mahathir, when they were both Prime Ministers, got off to a sticky start in the early 1980's.

She said: "He thought Britain was being unreasonable about student fees and was not treating Malaysia as a fully independent country -- and he may have been right.

"Malaysia for its part was pursuing a Buy British last campaign and Dr Mahathir was not exactly an enthusiastic admirer of the Commonwealth."

Together, they overcame those difficulties and forged a firm friendship and inaugurated a new age of co-operation and equal partnership between Malaysia and Britain, opening the way for a great expansion of trade and air services, she added.

"And the decade ended with Dr Mahathir chairing and hosting the best organised Commonwealth Prime Ministers' meeting which I ever attended, the meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 1989," she said. -- Bernama

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