

PM: We cannot afford to let down our guard

By Vijayan Menon

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. — Malaysia does not have to prepare for war to safeguard its peace but it cannot afford to allow its defence to be weakened to the point others stop respecting the country's freedom, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

Dr Mahathir said the cost of maintaining the armed forces was so high that the nation could not have an adequate "standing army".

"This is why we are forced to depend on a reserve army. Although ex-servicemen have served the nation, we hope they will continue to contribute their services to the reserve force.

"I believe their services will not be that demanding particularly for those who have undergone military training. Only a little time will be required for them to sharpen their defence preparedness.

"If ex-servicemen are able to render their services, we will be able to provide the nation with an adequate defence force without a high cost. I hope we can depend on the patriotism of our former soldiers," he said.

He was speaking at the launch of the Ex-Servicemen's Affairs Corporation (Perhebat) at the Entrepreneurs and Skills Institute at Sungai Buloh near here.

Dr Mahathir said social, political and economic stability could not be separated from external and internal security.

"A country will be destroyed completely if it is not protected from internal and external security threats. Fortunately, we in Malaysia are not only able to safeguard our peace and security but also able to take an active international role through the United Nations peace-keeping programme," he said.

Dr Mahathir said while the country's participation with the UN peace-keeping forces had enhanced its dignity, the experience gained was immensely beneficial for boosting the military's efficiency in maintaining peace.

"At present, our forces are not only more efficient but have a broader outlook," he added.

The Prime Minister said from 1984 until last year, a total of 53,417 soldiers had completed their service.

On an average, he said, 5,300 soldiers left the service every year and the problem ex-servicemen faced was how to replace their source of income.

"An ex-serviceman's opportunity to find employment or undertake a business will depend on several factors such as experience in military service, level of education and knowledge, property for collateral, ability to compete in the job market and face changing circumstances."

Dr Mahathir said a special fund called Ex-Servicemen's Fund has been established to help Perhebat with a launching grant of RM30 million and an annual allocation of RM26 million.

"Retirees in other services have not been given

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Dr M: We care for lot of ex-servicemen

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such help. It is hoped that the corporate sector will play its part in making a success of the attempts by ex-servicemen in seeking an alternative means of livelihood."

Dr Mahathir said the planned development of the employment potential of ex-servicemen was important as the nation strove to achieve developed nation status.

In this context, Dr Mahathir said, Perhebat would be effective in providing training for former soldiers.

"Focus should be given on the training of skills, management expertise and most importantly, the right work ethics. This is because working outside the military is very different from working in the service.

"In the military, loyalty is to the Government through the officers who are its representatives while in the business world, allegiance is to customers."

Dr Mahathir said the kind of service extended to customers would determine the success or failure of ex-servicemen and this had to be

stressed in the training provided by Perhebat.

He added the Government always gave serious attention to the welfare of ex-servicemen as they had given a large part of their youth in defending the country.

The newly corporatised Perhebat has been placed under the Armed Forces Fund Board so that it would provide entrepreneurial training and also enhance its corporate strength to create greater commercial opportunities for ex-servicemen.

Dr Mahathir also wit-

nessed the signing of memoranda of understanding between Perhebat and 13 companies and institutions which would help provide training, employment and commercial opportunities either through the franchise system or sub-contracts to ex-servicemen.

Also present were Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak, Armed Forces Chief Jen Tan Sri Borhan Ahmad and Armed Forces Fund Board chairman Jen (R) Tan Sri Mohd Ghazali Che Mat.