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1997 can be an even better year, says PM

THE country achieved many successes in 1996. It launched the Multimedia Super Corridor, two telecommunications satellites and the national motorcycle, took over the renowned British sports car company Lotus, and saw the first Malaysian appointed as the United Nations General Assembly president.

But Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said 1997 can be an even better year. To have that, Malaysians must avoid being complacent and arrogant and instead strengthen their resolve to work even harder.

"For only with hard work can we ensure the country's continued success," he said in his televised New Year's message last night.

Dr Mahathir also urged Malaysians to preserve unity and to remember the less fortunate. He mentioned last week's storm that killed over 160 people in Sabah at the onset of his message.

"We are grateful that, although Sabah was hit by a severe rainstorm last Thursday which claimed more than a hundred lives and destroyed properties, 1996 which ended today is nevertheless on the whole a historic year for our nation.

"Stability and peace prevailed throughout 1996 and our economy also achieved a high growth rate of more than 8 per cent. At the same time, inflation was under control maintaining its low level. Those wishing to work have the opportunity to do so, while earning relatively high incomes," he added.

The need for Malaysians to master information technology (IT) in the new year featured prominently in his message. To get ahead, Malaysians have no choice but to strive for greater knowledge and skills in IT. The people should be prepared to adjust their way of life and work towards the IT era, especially with the formation of the MSC.

"... We do not have a choice. The information era will force us to change our lifestyle and our way of working," Dr Mahathir said.

The new knowledge is not difficult to acquire; in fact, many Malaysians of all races have already mastered this knowledge to the extent of being more advanced than some of those in the developed countries.

"Therefore there is no reason why other Malaysians cannot master this knowledge to the level that is required. We must have confidence in ourselves. God willing, we will succeed," he said.

In urging the people to strengthen their resolve to work harder, Dr Mahathir said the mastering of new technology in the IT era will help boost their incomes and the country's economic growth.

He said the MSC, which includes the proposed Putra Jaya township and Cyber City, would be equipped with infrastructural communication facilities to enable various types of multimedia transactions - audio, imaging, data and all other information.

The MSC covers a 15km by 50km zone extending from the Kuala Lumpur City Centre to the new KL International Airport in Sepang.

"With this, the use of paper correspondence and cash will be reduced.

"Instead, all daily matters, government administration and business transactions will be done through the computer.

"Similarly industries will be using computers that can be linked worldwide," he said.

"This will be the kind of life that will be first introduced in the MSC and then subsequently throughout the nation.

"This means that our way of life will change. Whether we are able to adapt to these new changes, whether we will benefit from them or not, will depend on us. The earlier we adapt ourselves and the faster we acquire this new knowledge, the better will be our future."

He said Malaysia has succeeded in becoming an industrial nation and is now entering the IT era, one in which the workforce consists of knowledgeable workers.

The Prime Minister said the acquisition of new technology is important to overcome the shortage of workers and to end the dependence on foreign workers. Dependence on foreign workers is unhealthy because it limits income increases for the people, he said.

"For as long as we adhere to the old technology, we will be left behind, the way we would have been if we had continued with padi planting and rubber tapping. Whether we like it or not, we have to accept this era of information technology," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the Government has set up many universities and new educational institutions offering courses on IT and its application. The workplace, too, will provide training opportunities for workers who are interested, he said.

He also spoke on the need to intensify efforts to eradicate poverty, which has been reduced from over-40 per cent to less than 15 per cent.

"In our excitement over building skyscrapers and towers, expressways, high class towns and others, have we downgraded our efforts to eliminate poverty?"

"Did we not create so many jobs that we are forced to accept foreign workers? Can we wait until we have totally eradicated poverty before we beautify our towns, clean our drains and plant flowering plants?" he said.

"... We do not erect statues to ourselves, nor name places after leaders," he said.

The Prime Minister also urged all quarters to stop taking advantage of others' misfortune. In particular, he slammed non-governmental organisations that deliberately tried in 1996 to create situations to invite police action against them and then criticise the Government for being supposedly undemocratic.

"Let us not use the misfortune of others for our charade.

"There are serious matters that need to be championed without deliberately baiting our security forces to take action, thus making this country a target of ridicule by some groups."

In his message, Dr Mahathir also listed as major achievements for the nation the launch of the Rusa van by Perodua, the country's second national car manufacturer; the increase in Malaysia's per capita income to US\$4,457 (US\$1=RM2.53) or, in purchasing power parity the equivalent of US\$12,508; and the launch of the Seventh Malaysian Plan (1996-2000) and the Second Industrial Master Plan (1996-2005).

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