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MAHATHIR (YEAR ENDER)

1997 CHALLENGING YEAR FOR DR MAHATHIR

By: Azman Hashim

KUALA LUMPUR, (Bernama): If not for the devaluation of the ringgit and slackening of the stock market, 1997 would have been yet another outstanding year for Malaysia under the leadership of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The Prime Minister began the year brimming with confidence that the Multimedia Super Corridor will soon become a reality when he set out on a roadshow to promote the MSC in the United States, Japan and the European Union.

In fact, so confident he was with the apparent strength of the nation's economy that he took an unprecedented two-month long leave. He went abroad to take a much-needed rest as well as make some official and unofficial visits.

When Mahathir returned home on July 22, Malaysia was already feeling the heat of the economic crisis looming in neighbouring Thailand which was forced to float the Baht and appeal for help from the International Monetary Fund.

Malaysia, and other countries in the region like Indonesia, the Philippines and Singapore which were initially confident that Thailand's woes will not spread, later realised that they would be in the same boat when Indonesia became the next victim.

According to Dr Mahathir, the downturn in the region's currencies and stock market performances is not due to mismanagement of the economy, at least where Malaysia is concerned, but due to the immoral activities of currency and stock market speculators and manipulators.

The Prime Minister spent a good part of the year lobbying for some kind of control to be imposed on currency trading. If this is not done, he warned, the whole world will face dire consequences as a result of this irresponsible activity.

Dr Mahathir's struggles were not entirely fruitless as the IMF itself had agreed to study his suggestion while other international and regional forums like the Organisation of Islamic Conference, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting and Asean have also given the matter serious thought.

Meanwhile, Dr Mahathir's leadership was challenged by 34 American congressmen who wanted him to apologise or resign as Prime Minister for allegedly insinuating that the region's financial woes were caused by a Jewish conspiracy.

Although Dr Mahathir had denied several times that he had ever made such an allegation, the legislators wanted to table their motion against the Malaysian Prime Minister in Congress. Malaysians were naturally concerned as they saw this move as a sign of foreigners attempting to meddle in the affairs of Malaysia.

They reflected their anger through their elected representatives in the Dewan Rakyat who, at a sitting on Nov 19, unanimously supported the leadership of Dr Mahathir and criticised the action of the US congressmen which, the MPs said, overstepped diplomatic limits.

Malaysians also were upset when the United States attempted to investigate Petronas for its role in a gas exploration project with Gazprom of Russia and Total SA of France in Iran. The US had tried to invoke the unilateral laws which it had drafted to take action against any company which invests more than US\$20 million a year in Iran, its arch enemy.

It is clear that the episodes involving the congressmen's action and the attempt by the US administration to query Petronas' investment have strengthened the position of Dr Mahathir as prime minister.

It also proved that Malaysians still needed Dr Mahathir, who has been at the helm for 15 years, to lead them.

In his efforts to promote the MSC, Dr Mahathir visited the US from Jan 12 to 17, Japan Jan 18 to 21 and also several European countries while he was on vacation from May 18 to July 21.

The roadshow succeeded in enticing giant information technology companies to invest in the MSC, located in the south of Kuala Lumpur.

1997 saw Dr Mahathir visiting 19 countries to strengthen bilateral relations, woo investors, offer Malaysia's expertise to developing countries and to speak at international forums and seminars.

The countries he visited were Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, Pakistan, Malawi, South Africa, Mongolia, Kyrgystan, Hong Kong, Cuba, Chile, Uruguay, Argentina, Scotland (CHOGM), Slovenia, Canada (APEC) and Iran (OIC), besides the US and Japan.

The visits were all fruitful as several Memoranda of Understanding were signed and more foreign investments made their way into the country despite its current gloomy economic outlook.

On Dec 20, when Dr Mahathir celebrated his 72nd birthday, the sweetest gift he received was the united support of the people for his efforts to rehabilitate the economy through the various thrifty measures the government had announced.

With Dr Mahathir's diligence and total support from the people, 1998 - a year which is bound to be thorny - will be welcomed with the realisation that there is still light at the end of the tunnel.

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