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A year of many achievements

AFTER the celebration, comes the time to get down to serious business, the start of a new year. The countdown shows three years to a new millenium and 23 years to Malaysia's target of becoming a developed nation. However, time and tide wait for no man and we will have to analyse whether Malaysia has indeed progressed with every tick of the clock.

Economically, Malaysia has remained buoyant, with an abundance of opportunity to create wealth. The nation has therefore, been able to forge ahead in undertaking some of the biggest projects ever. Hence, as the new millenium approaches, Malaysians are seeing the construction of the final stages of the mammoth Kuala Lumpur City Centre project, on which the world's tallest building stands. One of the region's most modern airports is also rapidly taking shape to the south of Kuala Lumpur while computer genius Bill Gates has confirmed his participation in the prestigious Multimedia Super-Corridor project. National car manufacturer Proton rolled out its 1 millionth car two days ago, shortly after acquiring Britain's performance car company Lotus, perhaps silencing its critics forever. For commuters in the city, the much awaited light rail transit system was finally activated, heralding a new era in mass transportation. The problematic mini-buse enters its final year of service and the taxi service is to be overhauled.

The overall physical progress the nation has made, however, has not been without a price. Never before has Kuala Lumpur's roads been so choked as waves of development play havoc with traffic systems and tipper-trucks and tower cranes fill the skyline. Elsewhere, many point fingers at the massive development of hill and forest areas as the principal cause for the increasing incidence of flash floods. By and large, however, it has been accepted that a majority of these projects are for future convenience and though difficult, the price has to be paid now.

Politically, Malaysia has remained as stable as ever and the situation is expected to continue. The Umno political party emerged triumphant from the general elections and although the contest for party posts were somewhat intense, party members quickly closed ranks. Umno emerged stronger when its once bitter foe, the Semangat 46 party, was dissolved with all its members deciding to rejoin Umno for the sake of Malay unity. The stability should give Malaysians the confidence needed to forge ahead with achieving Vision 2020.

In the international arena, with the exception of isolated crises, the world has been at peace in 1996. Although the the situation between Israel and its Arab neighbours remain tense, the situation has been comparatively peaceful. The United Nations saw a new secretary general in Mr Kofi Annan to replace Mr Boutros Boutros Ghali while for Malaysia, the appointment of Tan Sri Razali Ismail as chairman of the United Nations General Assembly in 1996 was yet another recognition of the country's growing reputation. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was as busy as ever in 1996, visiting countries far and wide, from war-torn Bosnia-Herzegovina and the underdeveloped Republic of Guinea, to modern Japan and the US. New alliances were forged and existing ones strengthened. As the nation rejoices with the release of the Malaysian ambassador in Peru, the year 1996 will also be remembered sadly for several misfortunes. Among others, we grief with the people of Sabah who have lost their loved ones and property in the recent storm.

Hopefully, on this first day of the new year while filling in our new diaries, all Malaysians will plan to avoid whatever mistakes we made in 1996 and to strive harder for overall success. Development must not merely be limited to the creation of modern cities and vibrant industries. Development must also happen within every Malaysian. This year, while Malaysians hope to see further progress in the various development projects and better returns on investments, the nation also hopes to see more efforts towards becoming responsible, caring, ethical, friendly, competent and hardworking.

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