

09/01/1997

Contractors must take Mahathir's advice seriously

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THE story of building contractors in Malaysia is an interesting read. In the beginning, the profession received little respect. It was deemed a dirty business and contractors were generally perceived as crooks or cheats.

As such, construction companies back in the 60s and 70s were generally family-owned, badly managed, and seldom had highly skilled or technical people on board to provide support for the business. Many did not last long.

Then came a new breed of building contractors, those with extensive backgrounds in engineering and other technical fields and the local construction industry received a welcomed boost.

It was at around this time that the time taken for construction of buildings in the country began to be reduced significantly. The Dayabumi complex was completed in three years, a remarkable feat at the time.

Encouraged by the praise of government leaders and the award of further contracts, builders outdid each other with each passing project, completing them ahead of schedule and often in record-breaking times.

As far as construction of resorts are concerned for example, the completion in 1991 of the 300-room Delima Beach Resort by Tan Sri Ting Pek Khiing's Ekran Group in 56 days remains an unbreakable feat to this day.

Equally remarkable is the rapid completion of the Mines Resort City in Sungei Besi, on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. Here a disused tin mine is being transformed into a sprawling city.

Dubbed Seven Wonders of Malaysia, the city is made up of more than 5 million sq ft of built-up area, comprising seven separate projects, including a shopping complex over a canal, a beach resort, resort and golf club, hotel, theme park, business park and exhibition centre.

Construction began in January 1996 and 12 months later, nearly all seven components of the Mines Resort City are near completion.

Visiting the site on Tuesday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad commended the Country Heights group for the speedy completion of the project, and acknowledged that the industry in general has been completing projects in shorter time than they did before.

But he also put in a word of caution, that in racing to complete their projects, building contractors must maintain good management practices and not cut corners and compromise on quality.

Quality, he said, can be maintained even as construction time continues to be reduced. "Quality is not determined by whether the project is fast or slow but whether there is emphasis on quality," the Prime Minister said.

Dr Mahathir said there must be good management on the part of developers and contractors so that they do not have to resort to short cuts which may pose a danger at a later stage.

In Malaysia we are no strangers to evidence of such dangers. Men have perished under fallen beams, scaffoldings and gantries. And these are only those that occurred during construction. Remember Highland Towers?

In South Korea, where the construction industry has flourished and their builders are called upon to assist in mega projects around the world, they are only now starting to discover some of the errors of their ways during the construction boom years.

After several infrastructure disasters, the finger pointed towards

building contractors who were cutting corners in an attempt to complete their projects ahead of schedule and at lower cost.

The disastrous outcome of such unscrupulous practices did not become apparent until long after the buildings were completed and occupied. Short cuts in construction projects that jeopardise safety and quality today will similarly not be felt so soon.

This is why the advice to maintain good management practices and not cut corners must be taken seriously now, when new buildings are springing up around every corner, and not after a project in Malaysia falls, literally, on the list of great construction disasters.

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