

21 MAY 1997

Mahathir-Education

NO MORE "CONTROLLED EDUCATION" IN MALAYSIA, SAYS MAHATHIR

By: Azman Ujang

LONDON, May 21 (Bernama) -- Malaysia has given up its policy to control education in favour of opening up opportunities to everyone who wants to seek knowledge, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said here Tuesday.

"In the past, I admit that we used to control education. But now in this Information Age, it is almost impossible to control education. So we are opening up by allowing new universities to be set up especially by the private sector," he said during a question and answer session with about 1,000 top executives of Information Technology companies from Europe at the Imperial College here.

Dr Mahathir, who earlier addressed the executives to promote Malaysia's Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC), said that perhaps due to this policy, Malaysians were going abroad in search of knowledge in huge numbers.

"At any one time, there are over 50,000 Malaysians studying abroad. They go everywhere seeking knowledge, including in this prestigious Imperial College where they form the largest group of foreign students," said the Prime Minister.

He said with the help of the private sector to open up universities as well as by existing universities having linkages with foreign learning institutions, the number of Malaysian getting access to university education was expected to increase tremendously in the future.

And tertiary education need not necessarily be taught in campuses and Malaysia would be seeing more of this unconventional approach to learning with the emergence of new teaching materials and technologies with rapid developments in multimedia.

Dr Mahathir does not want higher education to be made available to those getting Grade A only as in the past because with the right type of training, those now regarded as unsuitable by the education system could also acquire considerable knowledge.

"There is scope for a lot more people to acquire knowledge if the right type of teaching materials are made more easily accessible to them," he said.

The Prime Minister spoke of his own university days where the process of learning was a lot more rigid than it should be.

He said: "Half of the time, I wouldn't understand my lecturers and I couldn't understand my own hand-writing".

"I would very much like to see teaching materials be easily made available not only to people who have the brain but also to those who have half a brain," he said.

During the Q & A session, one of the executives told Dr Mahathir that while he had ambitious plans to turn the MSC into the hub for international corporations to locate their research and development, as well as manufacturing and trading activities using multimedia, he should also be concerned about the question of environment in Malaysia.

This provoked a lively and witty response from the Prime Minister, who told the European captains of the IT industry that everything possible is being done to protect the environment in Malaysia.

But he said Malaysia's population increase from only five million when the country gained independence in 1957 to 20 million now had made the opening up of more land something unavoidable, not only for housing but also for basic amenities and infrastructure developments.

"So we have to be pragmatic over the question of preserving the environment," he said.

The Prime Minister, who is on a five-day mission here to promote the MSC, then drew laughter from the audience when he said: "I, for one don't believe in living on trees. It may be romantic to stay on trees but one day we should come down.

"If we continue to live on trees, then one day, we might not have enough trees. So we have to make progress," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysians were entitled to enjoy the kind of life they were now having as a result of the country's progress and prosperity but at the same time, the government would see to it that they too would take care of the environment.

"We take care of our environment and this is one reason why our lifespan is longer now. Malaysia is a young nation but already we are having an aging population," he said.

The Q&A session was also relayed "live" via video-conferencing to another gathering of company executives in Cardiff, the capital of Wales.

Several Welsh executives also posed questions to Dr Mahathir on the MSC.

Throughout the day, the Prime Minister also met privately with chief executive officers of a number of corporations who requested to see him with proposals to locate their operations in the MSC, the 15km by 50km corridor for the building of state-of-the-art cities and systems. It stretches out from Kuala Lumpur to Putra Jaya, the new seat of the Federal government, and the new Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang.

He also witnessed the signings of 12 memorandums of understanding and agreements to set up joint-venture in various multimedia-related projects between Malaysian and European companies.

Earlier in the day, Dr Mahathir also went to 10 Downing Street to call on new British Prime Minister Tony Blair, making him the first head of government from Asia to meet Blair since he came to power in the May 1 general election. -- BERNAMA

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