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Our future lies in IT (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad tonight sounded the clarion call to the people to prepare for the challenges of the information revolution and to rally behind the Government's efforts to develop Information Technology.

"Today, as I launch the National IT Awareness Campaign, I would like to ask Malaysians, young and old, rural and urban, Government and the Opposition alike, to answer this 'call to arms' and support the nation's initiative in harnessing IT.

"Let us resolve to face the globalised world together," he said in his address to the nation over the Government and private television and radio channels, indicating the Government's seriousness in turning the nation into a centre of excellence in IT.

Dr Mahathir later launched the national Information Technology campaign themed "IT As a Culture".

"With our future at stake we cannot afford to be a mere spectator of the information revolution. We need to be a part of it; we need to even lead it," he said, adding that this was why the Government had spent so much time and effort to turn the local IT industry into a world class one.

"This is also why, despite the recent currency crisis, the Multimedia Super Corridor projects will proceed as planned."

He added that Malaysia's attempts to become a pioneer in IT development was being closely monitored by the whole world, ready to criticise it if it failed and to follow it if it succeeded.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was going to great lengths and taking great pains to harness the power of IT, including the introduction of the National IT Agenda.

He said that Malaysia had no choice but to switch its economic base from one which was reliant on cheap labour to one driven by knowledge workers.

This, he said, was to prevent Malaysia from being left behind, being poorer and consequently subservient to the will of others.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia's economic competitiveness depended upon its willingness to harness IT and its people becoming knowledge workers.

"Through the use of information and knowledge, we can increase not only our productivity, but also the quality of our products and services," he said.

To develop into an army of knowledge workers, he added, Malaysians must start from today.

"The starting point is not just our children, but ourselves. How do we start? By not being afraid of technology, by mastering it, and by applying it in our work," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had great aspirations and did not want to be a mere assembler of products forever.

"We want to become product designers. We want to be a nation that uses its brainpower more than merely physical strength.

"We can become such a nation by daring to believe that we are as good as others and can be better, that we can learn and that we can be as innovative as others."

Dr Mahathir said only when both manufacturing and services sectors were manned by knowledge workers could Malaysia expect to sustain the required per capita Gross Domestic Product growth rates that would enable Malaysia to attain Vision 2020.

"Current projection indicates that, through an information and knowledge-based economy, we can increase our GDP levels by fourfold within 20 to 25 years.

"What this means is that, on average, Malaysians can expect to earn four times their current income in the future."

Emphasising that IT was in the forefront of the national socio-economic planning and development, Dr Mahathir said only a knowledge-rich and value-creating society could boost Malaysia's productivity to higher levels and ensure its economic survival.

"It is also this society that will become mature, liberal, democratic, tolerant, caring and economically just - the society envisioned by Vision 2020," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that the ultimate aspiration was to move Malaysians from being mere consumers or users of foreign multimedia content and applications to becoming innovators of such technology, producers of effective local applications and inventors of smart solutions.

"When we have such expertise, we can become a regional hub for multimedia content," he said.

The Prime Minister also reminded the people of future uncertainties and the impact of the information revolution on the social and cultural norms.

"Naturally, when we deal with the future, we also have to deal with the uncertainties. For example, while we know that technology will drive social change, its full impact on society, culture and equity has yet to be determined.

"It is entirely possible that our social and cultural norms, social practices and value systems may be eroded away. The choice is ours.

"We can maintain our cultural and social heritage, indeed even to enhance it or we can drift with whatever changes which may take place, losing our identity and cultural personality in the process," he said.

He added that Malaysia's strength in tackling future challenges lay not only in its experience in initiating and managing change in the past, but also its willingness to do even more in the future.

Citing the New Economic Policy as an example, he said within one generation Malaysia managed to transform the entire population from farmers, planters and fishermen to engineers, lawyers, doctors, academicians and businessmen.

"Transforming an entire nation is no small achievement. We have done it before. And we can do it again."

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