

23/10/1997

PM calls for global crusade against poverty

Joseph Bingkasan in London

LONDON, Wed. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has called for a global crusade against poverty, adding that the next century should be dedicated to freeing mankind from this scourge.

He also called for the world to work towards a global commonwealth based on a new world populated by flourishing, responsible, productive and sustainable democracies.

Dr Mahathir said these democracies should be distinguished by remarkable standards of human rights and human responsibilities.

Dr Mahathir said this during a lecture at the United World College of the Atlantic at Stationer's Hall, here, last night. His speech, titled Asia's Place and Asia's Role in the Making of the Global Commonwealth of the 21st Century, was delivered by Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

The Prime Minister was unable to attend the function as he was indisposed in Kuala Lumpur. He, however, left for Edinburgh tonight to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting which starts on Friday.

In asking the world community of nations to be committed to this endeavour, Dr Mahathir cited Malaysia's efforts to eradicate poverty, an exercise which had drawn praise from world bodies such as the United Nations Development Programme.

Dr Mahathir said: "It must be a new world made the more remarkable by the emergence of billions from the darkest pits of poverty. We now have the means to eradicate absolute poverty.

"According to UNDP statistics, less than 30 years ago, more than half of all Malaysians lived below the absolute poverty line. Malaysians can now look forward to entering the new century with zero absolute poverty, practically no one below the line of absolute poverty.

"The UNDP says that my modest country, Malaysia, has been the best poverty killer on the surface of this planet in post-war human history. If we can do it, the whole world can do it.

"Let me ask the most simple of questions: Why not commit ourselves to poverty's end? Why not make the 21st century the first century of mankind freed from the enslavement of poverty?" (Full text of speech on page 10)

He also called for another global crusade, this time to protect the environment.

He said: "I believe that what we must also work for is a single Global Commonwealth which is more caring not only of each human being and of his prosperity, but also more caring of the environment which must enrich his existence.

"Those who believe that caring for the environment is a luxury we cannot afford are wrong.

"In reality, not caring for the environment is a luxury which we cannot afford. If we cannot launch the necessary global crusade to save the environment at the dawn of the 21st century, the twilight of the 21st century will be dark. It will literally be pitch black."

Dr Mahathir also touched on the debate over the rise of Asia which had led some quarters to suggest that the 21st century would be the Asian Century.

He said: "I'm sorry to burst their bubble. I believe that the idea of "the Asian century" walks down the well-trodden path of darkness. And it

is a mirage mired in an incredible swamp of arrogance.

"I believe that the Asian century will not come. The era of Asian dominance over this planet will not dawn. What is more, I believe that we in Asia should not aspire to achieve it, or to allow a new hegemony even if it is `ours'.

"The age of imperialism is dead. The time for hegemony has passed. They must be buried. And their burial should be celebrated. There must be no resurrection of imperialism, no touting of hegemony, no glorification of dominance or domination in the 21st century. These things are immoral.

"Imperialism is no less evil if it is Asian imperialism. Hegemony is no more tolerable if it is Asian hegemony. Domination is no less a blight if it is Asian domination.

"What we in Asia must work for in the 21st century is not the century of Asia but "the century of the world", a single Global Commonwealth, which excludes no one, which includes all of humanity," he added.

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