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PM: Human intellect vital for growth

Azmi M. Anshar in Fukuoka, Japan

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said one central element crucial for the continued growth of mankind is the one which focuses on mobilising human intellect and spirit.

"Only by bringing back the humanity and self-identity elements can organisations hope to compete in this digital century," he said.

"This has been described by Lester Thurow as an era of man-made brain power industries," he said.

Dr Mahathir said this in his keynote address, The Digital Century: Opportunities for Mutual Collaboration Between Japan and Malaysia at the Fukuoka Dialogue.

About 2,000 Japanese business leaders and government officials were present at the dialogue.

Dr Mahathir said with all the dazzling effects of information technology, it must never be forgotten that artificial intelligence can never replace the human intellect.

"People, and specially managers of corporations, must lead business and society with social responsibility that displays not only balanced set of values of humanity and ethics into their organisations, but one that will inculcate the spirit of corporate integrity," he said.

In the digital century, in which everything is reduced to bits and bytes, Dr Mahathir said, one needs to have something solid and real to fall back on.

"As such, we will look towards the corporate leaders from our two countries to propagate our own philosophy of knowledge that is imbued with our own set of Asian values."

In the face of the information onslaught, Dr Mahathir said a proactive approach should be adopted towards counter balancing the western dominance of the cyber space.

"We are not saying that Western influence is all bad," he said, "what we are emphasising is that by being digital, being information technology literate and being technologically advanced, does not mean that our Asian values are not irrelevant."

"If anything, they will be even more relevant for our men and women as they search for their own niche and identities in a borderless environment," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia and Japan need more than industries and information technology as competent men and women to stay ahead of the race in the digital millennium.

"The two countries," he said "will need also the zest of creative imagination and free spirits as expressed in the art and creative sciences."

"It will only be possible," he said, "if leaders can continue to create the means to mobilise the energy and spirit and inner strengths of the work force," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the digital economy stresses the importance of networking of personnel worldwide or collaboration of human assets in exploring new and powerful ways to achieve common enrichment through the use of information technology, one area which Japan and Malaysia can definitely reap mutual benefit.

He said new industrial global standards need to be redefined, even as revolutionary information technology products and services are developed.

"Digitisation ensures greater accuracy and is said to be the key factor driving the consumer electronics industry in Japan in the 90s," he said.

"Digitisation in many fields has not yet been fully exploited," he said.

With Japan's experience and knowledge in this field and in the use of multimedia, he said, there are almost unlimited possibilities from new industries to be developed and expanded throughout the world with hardly any need for direct face to face interaction of personnel.

"As we approach the 21st century, fantastic changes are taking place which made what was impossible in the old economy of the Industrial Age suddenly possible in the Information Age," he said.

For practical purposes, Dr Mahathir said borders have already disappeared because knowledge, capital, company activities and consumer references ignore lines drawn on the map.

"Where countries once competed with one nation's trade surplus, resulting in another's trade deficit," he said "in the future both countries can benefit because that network of companies collaborate across borders to deliver value to customers in the most economically and sensible way," he said.

In short, Dr Mahathir said that the digital age has created conditions for the first time in history that will enable countries and companies to mutually enrich one another.

"There is a tremendous opportunity for those companies and countries with the courage to embrace these changes," he said.

For a limited time, Dr Mahathir said there is a relatively level playing field where developed and developing countries can work together in ways that create mutual benefit.

This is because many of the weaker developed countries are locked into obsolete industrial structures and legislative framework.

"Vested interest in this systems will stubbornly oppose any change," he said, "fortunately, these corporate interests have not had time to develop and become powerful in the developing countries like Malaysia."

Earlier Dr Mahathir and his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hamsah Mohd Ali were in Osaka to attend a special multimedia exhibition by Matsushita Electric Industrial Company Ltd. They also visited the Umeda Sky Building, a super highrise double tower intelligent building.

The Prime Minister and his wife also had lunch with the Governor and Mayor of Osaka.

Also present at the Fukuoka Dialogue were International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak, Health Minister Datuk Chua Jui Meng, Penang Chief Minister Tan Sri Koh Tsu Koon, Kedah Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Sanusi Junid, MSC executive chairman Tan Sri Dr Othman Yeop Abdullah, and Mirzan Mahathir, who is president of Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute.

All of them were panelists along with other experts from Japan, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore to talk about various aspects relevant to the information century.

The dialogue was also attended by Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto and other senior government leaders.

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