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Race has just begun

IT is not the dash of a 100-metre sprint. It is neither the run of steady, swarthy strides required of a 400-metre runner. Economic growth, especially one that elevates a country to a developed nation status, is the athletic equivalent of a marathon. It requires the grit, not to give up when energy is sapped and when the muscles move less and less mechanically to complete the distance, if indeed economic growth has such a thing as a finishing tape.

Thus it is timely that after almost nine years of strong Gross Domestic Product expansion, the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed, had to remind the country. "Having succeeded so well, so fast and so resoundingly, this is not the time to falter, to call a halt." Indeed, economic momentum, like the run of a long distance runner, should not, cannot be stopped. For a runner stopping means the loss of a race; for an economy to arrest its expansion is almost akin to the enervation of a nation. Retrenchment, loss of purchasing power are all gremlins that emerge from the crypt of recession to cause nightmares and hardships.

We have been through that experience once before, even though for a short period in the mid-1980s. The houses that we dreamt and had partially paid for were left unfinished and forlorn. Engineers were perforced to become salesmen to eke out a living. And many were simply out of work. Surely we have no desire to undergo that experience again. Neither do we wish our children to face the hard times of bad economic times.

Delivering the keynote address "The Way Forward" at the National Congress on Vision 2020 on Monday, Dr Mahathir said the Vision 2020, first promulgated at the Malaysian Business Council meeting in March 1991, articulated the best aspirations of the people and was in harmony with the Malaysian way of life. It made perfectly clear the priorities of the second generation of the country. It endowed the present generation with the resolve that they would be the last generation of Malaysians to live in a society that is called "developing."

For this reason we would have to build on the achievements of the past eight years. Those years provided us with the unique opportunity to make great strides in the economy. As the Prime Minister said, the massive commitment to the pursuit of our economic agenda of the past, must be sustained, and continue to be sustained. Indeed the effort requires greater tenacity, even greater commitment and greater effectiveness.

The reason for sustaining continued growth is plain. We only have to look at some countries that have stumbled after recording double digit economic growth for almost a decade.

For them lies the Herculean chore of cleaning the Aegean stables if they surely want to get out of the vortex of economic woes. Surely we would not wish to take that hardy and rocky road.

Indeed, to lengthen our economic stride we would have to constantly reform policies. We would have to tread into the brave new world of new ideas and new technologies. It is almost as if we would have to re-invent our industries, again and again. Any other option would leave us stranded, economically, as the rest of the world move fast beyond.

Finally, Vision 2020 calls for a united nation. That should not be forgotten. If we are at odds with each other all that we have gained will come to naught. Thus the clarion call by Dr Mahathir urging us to act forcefully and remain united to make Vision 2020 a reality.

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