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### Cultivating a caring spirit

THROUGHOUT the parade of events involved in the current economic turmoil, most observers agreed unanimously that Malaysia's financial system is its last line of defence. However, in the flurry of worries about depreciating currencies and investment values, little mention has been made of the crucial role that every Malaysian has played and continues to play in keeping the nation together. It must be remembered that the robust progress charted by the nation since its independence is in no small measure due to the active cooperation of its people in ensuring that the nation's success is enjoyed by all. The very fact that Malaysians have retained their charitable habits despite the economic crisis only serves to underline this theory. The preservation and strengthening of this caring attitude was considered so crucial that it was incorporated into Malaysia's Vision 2020. This caring attitude will one day make Malaysia stand out as a leader among other developed nations.

At the moment, a large section of the Malaysian population is under some form of financial pressure or other. Many people are lamenting a substantial loss of investments while others are facing a fall in wages or a freeze in increments and perks. However, one must not lose sight of the larger picture - preserving a caring attitude which in turn will preserve national peace which is crucial to a swift economic recovery. Caring however, should not be seen as merely involving the giving of financial and other forms of material aid. Malaysians must empathise with each other and try to understand the problems others may be facing right now. For example, those involved in trade must not take advantage of the lower ringgit to increase prices unnecessarily and if price increases do become inevitable consumers in turn must understand the unavoidable necessity.

The sight of people rioting in protest of price increases or of traders going on strike for days demanding them is not a pretty one. In fact, such acts could prove to be the final straw that breaks the back of any nation in the throes of an economic crisis. Malaysians have worked very hard and made some huge sacrifices to ensure peace and harmony. By enlarging the economic pie, the country's wealth has been evenly distributed among the various races, thereby eliminating any risk of tensions. As a result, Malaysia has often been touted as a model for peaceful living in a multi-ethnic society. By and large, it has been through inculcating a caring attitude that the nation has been able to achieve success. It was amid the general peace and stability prevailing in the nation that economic development quickened its pace and moved into the fast-lane. Industries thrived and foreign direct investment flowed into Malaysia bringing a great deal of prosperity to its people.

However, the unfortunate have never been forgotten in Malaysia's drive towards progress. In the past few decades, the Annual Budgets have always given priority to the less-privileged. Resources have been poured into eradicating poverty and illiteracy as well as boosting the savings and per capita incomes of every Malaysian while reducing taxes. In return, one cannot deny that the business sector particularly, has been generous in giving back to society what it has earned from the country's rapid economic progress. The tiny seeds of charity sowed through the Annual Budgets have produced bountiful harvests and helped Malaysia to further nurture the unity of its people.

The general consensus is that the present downturn is only a hiccup and

that Malaysia will recover, especially since the nation has introduced tough measures to weather the economic storm. However, the rate of recovery will greatly depend upon the level of cooperation among Malaysians. It will also depend on them not losing sight of the unity that has brought the country so far in so short a time. Therefore, the observation by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that charity has prevailed among Malaysians even during the difficult times means that the country's last line of defence is still very much intact.

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