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Directive to develop Labuan into a 'Garden Island'

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LABUAN, Fri - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has directed government officials to take immediate steps to develop Labuan into a "Garden Island" to attract more tourists.

The Prime Minister appealed to the people and voluntary organisations to help the government make this a reality by cleaning the beaches and undertaking landscaping along the roads.

"We want to make Labuan the world's most beautiful island," he said during a meet-the-people session at the Dewan Serbaguna Labuan Municipal Council today.

He said during this time when the country was facing economic problems, the government would not simply depend on Labuan's status as the International Offshore Financial Centre (IOFC).

IOFC was established to attract banks and financial institutions.

He said Government officers in Labuan had promised to submit reports to him together with photographs of voluntary workers cleaning the beaches every month.

However, he said the government would not shirk its responsibility but would also provide as much allocation as it could afford.

"With the help of voluntary organisations I'm confident Labuan will turn into an attractive tourist spot and would develop effectively."

"Efforts to turn Labuan into a tourist attraction would continue until the financial situation has revived."

At present certain parts of Labuan have already been decorated with plants and landscaped roads.

Speaking at a Press conference after visiting the RM138 million airport terminal which is under construction and other federal projects, Dr Mahathir said Labuan had the potential of a tourist spot but not much concentration was given to this sector.

He said when the airport terminal was ready by the end of this year, flights need to be improved.

"Maybe we can establish direct flights to and from Japan and Australia to attract people from these countries," he said.

Japan and Australia have war memorials of their nationals who were victims of the Second World War on the island.

Dr Mahathir said there was also a need to provide jogging tracks, cycling and horse riding facilities and other activities to attract tourists to the island.

On steps to be taken to promote Labuan's status as the IOFC, Dr Mahathir said the government would study the matter. The IOFC was set up in Labuan in 1990 when it also became a tax-free zone.

On the possibility of setting up a university in Labuan, he said this could be done if there were takers.

"The cost of living here is quite high, many of the food supply comes from the mainland," he said.

He called on the people to establish vegetable farming using hydroponics and introduce caged fish farming to reduce cost of food on the island.

During his visit to the airport terminal, he was told that the project was 70 per cent completed.

Started in November 1996, the terminal has a built-up area of 16,000 square metres and a 2,900 metre runway.

Dr Mahathir also visited the 14 storey RM200 million Federal Tower

Complex administrative block in Kiamsam. It will be occupied by 27 government agencies by the end of this year.

After the meet-the-people session Dr Mahathir performed Friday prayers at Masjid Jamek An-Nur. This was followed by donations from several companies, organisations and individuals totalling about RM170,000 to the National Special Fund.

He left for Kota Kinabalu later to complete his programme there.

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