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Dr Mahathir: We'll pull through (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told an international audience of policy-makers and influential leaders today that Malaysia had managed to be democratic without being unstable, adding that investing in Malaysia was still a wise move.

The Prime Minister, in his speech at the fourth Pacific Dialogue, said Malaysia had worked hard for stability and despite opposition, had succeeded quite well.

"We are able to tackle problems such as the one we face now fairly well. We will not come out of it unscathed, of course. We will be bruised and battered, but Malaysians will pull through eventually," he said.

The two-day dialogue, dubbed the meeting of the minds, is being organised jointly by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies, the Asia-Pacific Policy Centre and the Institute for Policy Research.

Participants and speakers include Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, United States Defence Secretary William Cohen, former US Secretary of State Dr Henry Kissinger, Director of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences Professor Zhang Yunling, former Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans, president of Japan Centre for International Exchange Tadashi Yamamoto, chairman of American International Group Incorporated Maurice Greenberg, the Philippines' director-general of the National Security Council Jose Almonte and chairman of Isis (Malaysia) Tan Sri Noordin Sopiee.

Dr Mahathir said that despite the economic problems, Malaysia was doing well and bearing up under the strain.

"In 1969, we had racial riots and people were killed in the streets of Kuala Lumpur. People expected the riots to recur periodically. But there has not been one since that 1969 incident.

"We have emerged from it more conscious of the damage it can do to us and the need to avoid it. Since then we have become more united, always having Governments in which every race is represented."

Dr Mahathir said even in the region, Malaysia was doing well and was at peace with everyone and vice versa.

"Yes, we (in the Asian region) are all facing problems at the moment but that neutralises the problem. If some are facing problems and others are not, then we won't have equal capacities to work together. Now we have, and intend to use our common misfortunes to enhance our co-operation."

He said Malaysia hoped to co-operate with all the countries in the Pacific region and expected to gain from the situation.

Dr Mahathir said it was important that the peoples of the Pacific made their contribution towards building a better world.

"As we rush towards the 21st Century, we want to see a better world. And the Pacific Ocean, the divide that unites, is an important part of that world."

He said rich nations would suffer from the spillover effects of unstable and impoverished neighbours, noting that the universal prosper-thy-neighbour policy would keep such problems at bay.

He said problems like mass migration would be inevitable if countries did not help each other to prosper.

The Prime Minister's reminder of the prosper-thy-neighbour policy carried special significance as it fell on the ears of influential policy-makers from both sides of the Pacific Ocean at a time when a number of

Asian countries are facing economic problems due to the depreciation of their currencies.

"When you beggar others, their problems will spill over into your country. And among the problems will be mass migration into your country," Dr Mahathir said in his keynote address.

He said Malaysia believed in the policy of prospering its neighbours instead of begging them, like in the case of Vietnam.

"When Vietnam was trying to stabilise after the country was reunified, many Vietnamese decided to migrate. The country was very poor and the migrants were actually economic refugees.

"They landed in Malaysia because we are so near. We could not provide them with permanent asylum and had to arrange for them to be sent to more hospitable countries like those in Europe, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand."

Dr Mahathir said to resolve the problem, Malaysia worked with the Vietnamese to help them rehabilitate the country.

"We even invested in Vietnam, though God knows we need the investments for ourselves. But whatever may be the reason, Vietnam began to prosper a little," he said, adding that eventually all remaining refugees returned to their country as they saw employment opportunities there.

Dr Mahathir also cited the mass migration of the Albanians to Italy to reciprocate the Italian invasion of Albania before World War II.

"The Albanians had the problem of poverty in their country. Even though they did not like the Italians, they had to go to Italy to seek relief from the misery at home."

The same kind of migration, the Prime Minister said, took the Mexicans to the US.

"We in Malaysia believe that if our neighbours are poorer than we, we will face migration and other problems," he said, adding on a lighter note that Malaysia was fortunate because it was now as poor as its neighbours.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia wanted stability not only in the country but in the region as well.

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