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Government `to continue helping Bumi firms'

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KOTA BARU, Fri. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the Government will continue to help big and small Bumiputera companies to enable them to compete with other races in the business sector.

He said that it was the Government's responsibility to ensure that all races share the country's wealth.

"If we allow all the Bumiputera companies to collapse, we will be placed in a situation before the New Economic Policy was introduced, where the poor were generally the Malays," he added.

He said, however, the Government would only assist Bumiputera companies which had the potential to succeed and that "there is no favouritism".

Dr Mahathir said the Government's assistance to Bumiputeras was often interpreted by certain foreign quarters as helping "government cronies" as if they were favoured by the Government.

"Such allegations were made because they are envious of the achievements of the Malays. They actually want the Malays to remain the poorest race in the country. They have bad intentions and if possible, they want us to remain stupid.

"Even if a Malay businessman succeeds without Government's assistance, he will still be labelled a government crony," he added.

He was addressing a large crowd at the launch of the Kelantan Multimedia, Telecommunications and Electronic Exposition (Emtek '98) at Sekolah Menengah Chabang Empat Pasir Mas/Tumpat.

Dr Mahathir was accompanied by his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali. Others present included former Deputy Prime Minister Tun Abdul Ghafar Baba, MP for Gua Musang Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Mustapa Mohamed, Rural Development Minister Datuk Annuar Musa, Umno Youth chief Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi, Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman and Umno Information chief Datuk Dr Yusof Nor.

Dr Mahathir said since the NEP was introduced, thousands of jobs were created as well as scholarships given which enabled children in the rural areas to pursue their education which later enabled them to compete on equal footing with other races.

He said these efforts helped the economy and created many millionaires and even billionaires.

"We should be proud of them. We don't question who they are because they are our representatives from among the Malays in the country. We want all the races to be equal.

"We do not want a situation where the poor are the Malays and the rich are from other races. This is a dangerous situation and can lead to chaos in the country," he added.

Dr Mahathir also advised the people to familiarise themselves with information technology so that they could use IT to assist in the nation's progress.

"The use of IT is everywhere. It has created a borderless world. But there is now an attempt to colonise nations using IT instead of war planes or canons."

He said an example of the power of IT was the transfer of millions of ringgit from one country to another with the touch of a button.

"We now have a borderless world. The world has become as if one country. People can move anywhere without restrictions and without respect for our borders.

"I do not know if this was done on purpose to control us but the fact is that they have succeeded in making us poor, and because of that, they are able to control our economy. They get richer and richer."

Dr Mahathir said as the value of the ringgit depreciated, so would the people's purchasing power.

When this happens, he said, the people could not buy imported products, such as milk, wheat and medicine, and as a consequence, the people would revolt and blame the Government.

"So, they are not only creating economic problems but political and social problems as well," he added.

Citing Indonesia as an example, he said the country with more than 200 million people and experiencing a growth rate of seven per cent for several years was now made poor following the fall in the value of the rupiah.

"The people have forgotten the efforts of the Government to build the country over the past 30 years. At one stage, Indonesia was regarded as one of the economic tigers of Asia."

However, he said, when the rupiah was attacked, it caused numerous problems, including high cost of essential items which have to be imported, the closure of 16 banks, the closure of 10,000 companies and the loss of jobs for 20 million people.

Speaking to reporters later, Dr Mahathir said the development of the Multimedia Super Corridor would proceed despite the current economic situation.

He said the economic problems in the region had also affected the finances of companies planning to invest in the MSC.

For example, he said, companies in Japan have slowed down their investment abroad and this would affect the MSC.

Asked if the economic problems could be overcome soon, Dr Mahathir said it could not be solved in the short term because "we have lost the power to dictate the rise and fall of currency".

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