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PM: Renew commitment to unity (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in his annual New Year message tonight, urged all Malaysians to renew their commitment to national unity, asking them not to give up in face of current economic difficulties.

Instead, the people should continue to support the Government and be willing to make sacrifices to help steer the country out of the difficult period.

In striving to help the economy recover, Dr Mahathir said, the people would have to endure all sorts of pressures and make sacrifices so that the country's problems could be overcome quickly.

"We must not despair and admit defeat. We must be willing to face challenges, willing to sacrifice in defending our independence and dignity.

"In fact, our unfinished struggle has become even more critical."

The Prime Minister's message was broadcast by Radio Televisyen Malaysia.

He said the country had to make sacrifices which had to be fully supported by the people as it had no other choice if it wanted to avoid having to borrow from foreign powers.

He called on the people to save and invest confidently even though they knew that their savings would depreciate if the value of the ringgit continued to fall.

"If we have no confidence in our own currency, and because of that we don't save or invest and instead convert our money to foreign currencies or deposit them overseas, our currency will still depreciate.

"On the other hand, if we consistently save, buy and keep shares, our currency will not fall abruptly. That is why the confidence we show in our ringgit is very crucial because only when we are confident will we save and invest.

"Protecting the ringgit is our common responsibility because others will not do so."

The Prime Minister said Malaysia would not borrow from international institutions as that was not the approach to resolve the current problems.

Others would impose various conditions which would render the people worse off, force the Government to increase taxes on an already impoverished people, increase interest rates and close down most of the banks and finance companies, he said.

They would also insist that foreign conglomerates be allowed to come in, take over local banks and companies and implement policies designed to optimise their profits.

"We will no longer be free. The people will be left jobless and to suffer. This is the choice that we have if we are not prepared to sacrifice a little."

Dr Mahathir said he did not wish to alarm the people by painting such a scenario but added that that was what had already happened to countries which had agreed to the conditions for foreign loans.

While thanking all Malaysians for expressing confidence in the Government and in himself, Dr Mahathir said their pledge of support should be translated into action.

"Thank Allah that the pressures on us (by currency and stock market manipulators) have unified Malaysians of all races to back the Government in preserving Malaysia's independence and sovereignty."

He said the National Economic Action Council, chaired by him, would be tasked with planning and implementing measures necessary to make Malaysia more competitive globally and overcome the prevailing financial and economic setbacks.

A specific campaign would be launched to minimise extravagance and wastage of funds within the Government and among the people as well as reduce production costs and increase productivity.

It would also aim to reduce imports and increase exports, and upgrade skills, efficiency and quality of goods and services.

There would be more determined efforts to attract foreign tourists and investment for the manufacture of export-oriented products and services while encouraging Malaysians to holiday in the country, he said.

Dr Mahathir paid a special tribute to housewives, adding that women could play an important role by observing thrift and minimising extravagance.

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