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Mahathir: Step up research and development

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MALAYSIA can save a lot of money which currently goes to paying royalties for imported technologies by stepping up research and development, particularly applied research, says Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Investing in research will in the long run reduce the outflow of funds and boost economic recovery as the royalties paid by Malaysia for imported technologies yearly is very high, he said last night.

"This is of course a drain on our foreign exchange earnings," he said, noting that in the current circumstances the country can ill afford the outflow.

"We should therefore develop our own technology and engineering capabilities. It will not only reduce the cost of technology but we may even be able to export it to reverse the flow of royalties paid.

"Malaysia would do well to spend money on research, especially applied research. The economic recovery can be speeded up and we may emerge from the turmoil stronger," he said at the Academy of Sciences Annual Dinner in Kuala Lumpur.

There are ample opportunities for applied research, Dr Mahathir said. While the original discovery may have come from another country, the application of the results can be done in the developing countries.

The Prime Minister said that applied research may also be costly, but the opportunities to capitalise on the original research to develop low-cost applications are unlimited.

Merely by modifying applications developed elsewhere to suit local conditions, numerous patents can be developed, he said.

"Although royalty may have to be paid for the original research, at least there will be ownership of local applied research results," Dr Mahathir said.

However, thanks to globalisation, developing countries have been losing some of their best brains.

"Since poor countries have neither the costly laboratories nor the ability to offer good pay, they have been losing their researchers to the richer countries."

Consequently, the poor countries have actually to pay for the results of research carried out by their own nationals in other countries, he said.

The Prime Minister noted that while pressure has been exerted for the opening of economies and markets, no such effort is made in science and technology.

"In fact intellectual property protection is greater today than at any time in history.

"The machinery of the international and powerful national institutions are mobilised to protect intellectual property rights as never before," he said.

Why this heightened protection and why are the markets of poor countries not accorded the same treatment, Dr Mahathir asked.

The Government, he reiterated, remains committed towards promoting science, engineering and technology. It is encouraged by the successes achieved by Malaysian scientists over the years, he said, adding it goes to show that Malaysia has capable scientists and researchers.

The Prime Minister, who also presented certificates to the academy's new fellows, then challenged the Malaysian scientific community to produce a

Nobel laureate by the year 2020.

Among those named fellows for 1998 are founder-president of the Environmental Management and Research Association of Malaysia Ir K.Kumarasivam, vice-president of Mimos Bhd Dr Mohamed Awang Lah and Porim Director-General Datuk Dr Yusof Basiron.

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