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Make most of our strengths

BY now Malaysians should be sufficiently braced for a challenging year ahead with the economic downturn. Difficult days notwithstanding, undeniably the people are thankful that there are clear skies and national stability.

As we are only too aware, a healthy environment, including clean air, and unity cannot be taken for granted. Those who went through last year's choking haze which enveloped many parts of Southeast Asia and the dark days following the 1969 May 13 racial riots, will resoundingly say "Never again". No doubt, the present economic slowdown, caused by manipulative currency speculation, has impacted on all but it cannot be as bad as the tension-filled days of 1969 when all of us lived in constant fear.

To ensure no recurrence of the haze, Asean has just launched the region's first action plan to collectively combat the problem through preventive, monitoring and fire-fighting measures. The recently-approved National Biodiversity Policy, aimed at conserving the country's plants and animal life and creating a safe, healthy and productive environment, can only be effective if all concerned, particularly State Governments, take the lead in its implementation.

It cannot be overemphasised that unity among the communities, the linchpin of national stability, is paramount. In these challenging times, it is vital as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said in his New Year message, the people remain steadfastly united. Steering the nation out of the current economic problems clearly requires the people's indomitable spirit and support. They must be vigilant against subversive elements out to fish in troubled waters. Their aim is to split the people and to cause anxiety and panic. Last month's discovery of 39 packages along the North-South Expressway, initially suspected to contain explosives but turned out to be otherwise, may be the work of some mischief-makers, but the police are obviously not taking chances and are stepping up surveillance.

Rumour-mongering is another evil which must be stamped out before it causes further damage. There is a need for collective action to counter these negative forces. Apart from executive action to come down hard on perpetrators, an effective way is for the people not to give credence to such talk. The authorities should counter this by presenting the facts which they have recently done by telling the public, for example, that the Malaysian banking system is sound and that all deposits are protected by Bank Negara.

It goes without saying that all responsible citizens, led by the nation's leaders at all levels, and the public and private sectors as well as their unions have to rally and guide the people as to how they should act to help in the nation's swift recovery. As Dr Mahathir so rightly points out it is important the people translate their pledge of confidence in the Government and himself into action. Herein lies the crucial task of all Malaysians to send the correct message to the people. It is noted of late, that the people are increasingly seeking counsel as to what they should do in these troubled times, as it is clear that many are quite bewildered by the rapidly developing financial situation in the Asian region.

Central to a speedy economic recovery is confidence in the ringgit, protecting the currency, as Dr Mahathir has said, "is our common

responsibility because others will not do so." The Government has already in place measures to stabilise the economy, what is urgently required is restoration of investor confidence. It is imperative that Malaysians show the way by saving and investing locally with confidence.

In the final analysis, the message must be hammered home that if Malaysians do not help themselves by lending their support through positive action, they are the biggest losers. The alternative is foreign assistance. Demonstrating that they have unwavering faith in the Government's measures, through enhancing unity and acting rationally in the national interest, is the surest way of helping the nation pull through.

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