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Malaysians in Japan give PM vote of confidence

Hardev Kaur in Tokyo

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday received a vote of confidence from the Malaysian community in Tokyo. They told him to continue doing what he had been doing for the country and that they would continue to support him.

A Malaysian student made the pledge to thunderous applause from those present at the conference hall of the Malaysian Embassy in Tokyo.

They gathered around him, seeking his autograph, wanting to take pictures with him. Despite a tight schedule, he obliged. The students even stopped him at the steps of the bus (on which he was travelling) to take pictures. Also present was Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali.

Earlier, Dr Mahathir had explained the economic and political situation in the country at a crowded conference hall. Among those present were Malaysian students, Umno club members, representatives of the Association of Malaysian Professionals and Malaysian officials.

He elaborated on the rationale for currency exchange controls and the need to insulate the domestic economy from the hostile external environment, especially the need to protect the ringgit from currency speculators and manipulators.

Questions ranged from the role of women and how they could contribute to national development, why the country was under the "spotlight" and given such adverse publicity abroad and employment opportunities for students on returning home. He was also asked on foreign reports about alleged bailouts of certain companies.

In reply to a question, he said despite the financial crisis the country might be able to achieve the targets of Vision 2020 "if we work hard". The plan envisaged an average growth of seven per cent a year to achieve the target.

The country had recorded a growth of more than eight per cent for nine years and "therefore we were actually ahead of the target".

But due to the financial crisis, the economy contracted by 2.8 per cent in the first quarter of this year and by 6.8 per cent in the second. For the whole of this year the economy is expected to contract by 4.8 per cent.

But next year, as a result of the Government's measures such as the currency exchange controls, steps to strengthen and insulate the economy, it is estimated that there will be a positive growth of one per cent. If this uptrend is maintained in the remaining years of the plan, the targets may be achieved.

Vision 2020, a 30-year development plan, envisages that Malaysia will be a developed country by the year 2020. While economic progress has been stressed in the plan, the other attributes of the country such as the Asian values, are not neglected in the plan.

Dr Mahathir assured that employment opportunities were still available provided "you are not too choosy. Once the economy has improved then you can go where you want to".

The Prime Minister is on a five-day working visit to Japan.

Today, he will address the Second Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD II). Some 10 African leaders are attending the conference.

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