

09/01/1998

PM: Graft pushes up cost of living (HL)

Rashid Yusof; Leslie Andres

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - A society beset by corrupt practices will face a high cost of living on top of their inability to progress and prosper, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said this was because the "corruption cost" exists in everything they do.

Launching a drive against corruption at the Anti-Corruption Agency headquarters, Dr Mahathir said under such circumstances, one's earnings from corruption would not be of any good to him as he too would face the "corruption cost" when dealing with another officer.

"All (gains) will be wiped out due to the high cost of living and bribery for everything."

Cabinet Ministers, Terengganu Menteri Besar Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad, who is chairman of the Menteris Besar and Chief Ministers Council, and senior officials were present.

The drive against corruption is called "A Movement to Consolidate the Integrity System of the Administrative Management of the Government of Malaysia". Dr Mahathir also launched the Anti-Corruption Act 1997 which among others gives ACA officers the power to search a suspect's house.

The new Act gives the ACA greater clout including tapping telephone conversations and getting copies of a suspect's bank account.

Dr Mahathir said despite the perils of corruption, some still favour short-term gains over bigger, long-term benefits for helping to cleanse corruption. And when an opportunity for bribery comes, both the giver and recipient indulge in it.

"This is the problem we face," Dr Mahathir said, adding that corruption might start unintentionally like getting things done faster.

"Then, the work is deliberately delayed to get the 'catalyst' from the customers. Then the practice becomes common and all dealings need the 'catalyst'."

He said customers should be patient and when things were delayed deliberately they should report to the Public Complaints Bureau, ACA and others including the media.

Dr Mahathir said while there was a possibility that many did not make complaints as they feared reprisals, there would be no such worry if all those who had been victimised filed complaints.

He said relevant officers had to give serious consideration to all complaints, including setting a time frame to get things done.

He said there were two levels of corruption. One is where society resents it and those indulging in corruption do so discreetly. He said this form of corruption could be contained.

The other stage is when corruption is committed openly. When it reaches this level - where recipients solicit, and givers provide bribes openly - those from the very top to the lowest are involved.

Dr Mahathir said since all those involved would gain personally, everybody would defend the practice making it difficult to combat corruption.

Fortunately, he said, Malaysia was in the first category where giving bribes had not become a common practice.

Dr Mahathir also spoke on the danger of people filing reports on corruption being driven by ulterior motives.

He said the power vested in the people to report bribery cases had to be

taken seriously. Evidence which was rather conclusive had to be acquired to facilitate investigation, as an assumption that corruption had taken place was not adequate, he added.

In this context, the Prime Minister said the existence of poison-pen letters with wide circulation would hamper efforts to combat bribery as a lot of time would be exhausted investigating unfounded allegations.

At the same time, allegations which had credence might be ignored as it was perceived to be similar in nature to the unfounded allegations, he said.

Dr Mahathir said thus efforts to prevent corruption would not be effective.

(END)