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Dr M: Opposition using problems to win popularity

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today opposition parties are not extending any form of co-operation to the Government in its efforts to bring about speedy economic recovery.

Instead, Dr Mahathir said, they were using the current economic problems to fish for votes and gain popularity.

He was asked to comment on a statement by DAP secretary-general Lim Kit Siang yesterday that the party would win more seats in the next general election due to the current economic situation.

Speaking to reporters after launching the Malaysia-British Business Council at Carcosa Seri Negara, Dr Mahathir said he felt "very sorry" because the DAP made use of the present economic problems for its own political mileage.

"I had hoped that they will work with the Government but unfortunately they see only political opportunities in the present turmoil.

"They don't see that this is something that we are facing together and therefore they should work with us to overcome the problem," he said.

Asked whether other opposition parties were extending any kind of co-operation, Dr Mahathir said:

"We thought at first they were, but apparently now they see an opportunity for themselves to win more seats.

"So they have their eyes focused on the seats while we have our eyes focused on helping the economy recover even if we become unpopular in the process."

On interest rates, Dr Mahathir said the National Economic Action Council was studying measures to reduce the rates to help companies facing difficulties.

Asked whether the interest rates which were stifling business activities could be eased, he said: "I think so, but there are problems of course in lowering interest rates."

Interest rates in Malaysia have risen substantially with inter-bank rates currently hovering at 11.05 per cent from only 7.5 per cent just before the manipulative attack on the ringgit began in July last year.

Asked whether Malaysia needs to subscribe to demands by the World Trade Organisation to further liberalise its financial sector to regain investor confidence, he said even in countries which subscribed to this, things were not working as planned.

"It doesn't seem to bring back confidence either. The answer is to manage the economy well," he said.

On the lower real Gross Domestic Product projection of 0.9 per cent for 1998 made by Malaysian Institute of Economic Research today, Dr Mahathir said:

"I think we have a fair chance of maintaining it at two to four per cent this year."

On whether he was worried about recurring haze during the 1998 Commonwealth Games beginning here on Sept 11, Dr Mahathir said he was confident that it would be held in a haze-free environment.

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