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Mahathir-ITEX '98

M'SIA NEEDS TO HARNESS CREATIVE TALENTS, SAY MAHATHIR

PETALING JAYA, Oct 10 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said Malaysia has to urgently harness its creative talents for productive purposes given the present economic predicament.

The country needed to be highly agile, flexible and innovative in order to face the challenges, he said opening the International Invention, Innovation, Industrial Design and Technology Exhibition (ITEX '98) at the Sunway Pyramid convention centre here.

Dr Mahathir spoke about the importance of engaging in creative activities such as research and development, having an open mind and the importance of self-belief.

"Failure to move with the time will leave us receding into the background as things speed ahead of us," he said.

Inventiveness resulted from a culture which encouraged curiosity and promoted the desire to learn about how things work and how improvement could be made to make things work better, he said.

The four-day ITEX '98, formerly known as the Malaysian Invention and Design Exhibition (MINDEX), is Malaysia's premier exhibition showcasing inventions, innovations, industrial designs and technologies in the Asia Pacific Region.

Speaking to reporters later, Dr Mahathir said new ways or criteria had to be found in order for researchers and investors to have access to financing for their projects.

Saying that he was still not happy with the progress of R&D in the private sector, the prime minister said: "I think we can do a lot more. We have a lot more funds that we have not used."

"One of the problems is the people who are controlling the funds who cannot really appreciate what the inventor or researcher wants to do, so we will have to have different criteria," he said.

"It is very difficult for a person who is not an inventor to assess somebody else's idea...we will have to find some ways, make it more loose," he said.

In his speech, Dr Mahathir said much talent would go to waste simply because the returns on investment in research were difficult to quantify.

This was especially so with basic research, he said.

"The investment in R&D is often regarded as wasteful by bureaucratic budgetary officers. The stress on direct returns by these officers often results in researchers being unable to get the necessary funds," Dr Mahathir said.

Perhaps, he said it was easier for the bureaucrats to be convinced of the need for applied research.

Basic research, which was important to the nation, must be encouraged through governmental financing so that the private sector could follow-up with applied research, he said.

"Although basic research may not show commensurate returns, the applications by the private sector can result in much wealth being generated. In the final analysis, the nation would have gained indirectly much more than the outlay in basic research," he said.

The prime minister said the belief held by developing countries that R&D was only for the rich was wrong as the countries could do a considerable amount of research in fields particularly suited to their conditions.

"There are literally tens of thousands of products invented and designed for the temperate climates which need to be modified and adjusted for the hot humid tropics.

"Here is an area suitable for research in the poor countries of the south, the cost is not too high and the environment is free for the purpose of testing," he said.

Dr Mahathir said no one had a monopoly of the skills of inventing and that if the facilities and funds were available, the results could be quite predictable.

"And so many scientists from developing countries have been found to be as capable or even more inventive than those from developed countries when they migrate to the rich countries where the facilities and the funds are readily available," he said.

The prime minister said the decline in Asian science and technology could be attributed to their less systematic approach to R&D and the application of science and technology.

He said many in the developing world had assumed that R&D and the application of science and technology was the advanced countries' monopoly and that they (developing countries) live off the results obtained by others.

However, Dr Mahathir said the capacity to develop indigenous applications from available information should depend on the skills of the recipients in the developing countries and without those skills, foreign technologies would not be of much use.

The prime minister said Malaysians, given the collective intellectual strength and stamina "could make the leap from the known to the unknown".

"Moving from terra firma to terra incognita requires increasing or harnessing our creative strategies," Dr Mahathir said.

The highlight of ITEX '98 is the invention and design competition involving 50 entries under 21 classifications of invention.

The World Intellectual Property Organisation Gold Medal and cash prize of US\$1,000 awaits the best overall invention.

Also present were Science, Technology and Environment Minister Datuk Law Hieng Ding and Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Abdul Halim Ali.

-- BERNAMA

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