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True grit and determination can effectively keep poverty at bay

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WELCOME back to the grind. Last week's double celebrations of Hari Raya Puasa and Gongxi Fa Chai was a welcome break, in more ways than one.

After endless rounds of ketupat and rendang, mandarin oranges and carbonated drinks, one must give oneself a break from the mountains of foodstuff on the dining table.

Too much of good food is not good, the good doctor says. Too much sugar and salt can trigger various kinds of ailments which the body may not be able to handle.

As do too much of fat-laden food and television viewing, be it from the existing channels, video cassette or compact and laser discs. Only a lean and mean body can withstand the rigours of a tough routine, especially when the going appears to be getting tougher in the days ahead.

Everyone scanning the newspapers and watching the television news breaks in the last few days can see the difficulties looming.

Prices of some essential items have gone up, supplies in some areas were short (but more because of the long holidays than anything else) and there's demand by service providers to raise rates in the light of the current economic problems.

Fears of retrenchment and lay-offs have been expressed by trade unionists and the ordinary workers, which reflect the main concern of salaried men and women. Job security is synonymous with life's security, and in a family entity, this means security of one's children's education, food and shelter.

It was amidst such fears and apprehension that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad sounded the call for patience and sacrifice, for renewing of everyone's commitment to national unity and resilience.

Dr Mahathir made his call on the eve of Hari Raya Puasa on Thursday night, following one in his Chinese New Year message a couple of days earlier.

In his Raya message, aired nationwide over television, the Prime Minister called on all Malaysians to be patient and demonstrate their willingness to sacrifice to help the country overcome the current economic problems.

"What we need is a bit of sacrifice and patience. We have experienced poverty before and we know we were able to overcome it. If we are able to face the challenges, God willing, we will surmount our problems again. This is not the time to struggle for our individual self-interest, or that of certain groups or parties," Dr Mahathir said.

A major concern of the Prime Minister was possible divisions amongst the people, as this would render the steps taken by the Government to consolidate economic recovery less effective and thus undermine the economy.

There are no visible signs of divisions among the people but in a multi-racial and multi-religious community, it only needs an emotional spark to ignite the flames of hatred and animosity.

Dr Mahathir's advice should not, and must not, be dismissed lightly. While everyone is enjoying their ketupat and rendang, mandarin oranges and ang pow packets in an atmosphere of fun and merry-making, Dr Mahathir's words of caution is food for thought.

The celebrations may have been a little subdued, but there was still plenty of cheer. In getting the people to rally around national efforts to

revitalise the economy, Dr Mahathir spoke of the country's experience in poverty, particularly in efforts to overcome the disease.

While today's situation is not quite like poverty in the traditional sense of the word, the fact is that if no careful thought is given in managing the problems, poverty will return with a force far greater and damaging than ever known.

Whether this happens or not will partly depend on how the people shoulder the responsibility with the Government in tackling common problems.

One can see all kinds of statements made in the last couple of months as the nation comes to grips with the problems.

A campaign to buy Malaysian products, initiated by the Malaysian Chinese Association, is gathering momentum; attempts to increase food production have also gained much ground with everyone owning patches of land starting to plant tomatoes, cili api and lemon grass; and alternatives being sought for international and imported foreign goods.

State Governments, too, have been active in getting the people to rally behind on-going efforts to push for speedy recovery. Since they have much say in land matters, they are in a better position to garner efforts in ensuring that idle lands be put to productive use, especially for food production purposes.

But everyone knows that all efforts will come to nought if they are not accompanied by grit and determination. World Bank president James D. Wolfensohn may have said some fine words to Malaysia over its management achievements, especially in poverty eradication.

In fact, Wolfensohn was reported to have said that the World Bank has also ruled out the need to discuss financial aid for Malaysia to deal with the impact of the region's financial problems.

Coming from an associate of the International Monetary Fund which is dishing out bitter pills to "help" South Korea, Thailand and Indonesia, Wolfensohn's words should put to rest whatever fears others may have of the Malaysian economy.

As Dr Mahathir concluded in his Raya message: "God willing, we will recover from our problems, wiser to face future challenges."

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