

14 MAY 1998

Mahathir-Poor

WE'RE WILLING TO BE POOR, SAYS MAHATHIR

By: Azman Ujang

KHARTOUM, May 14 (Bernama) -- For the past week in Cairo and here, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said several times that Malaysia has become a poor country because of the attack on its currency.

When talking to Egyptian businessmen and Malaysian students during his visit to Cairo last week, he drove home this point to indicate the extent of the country's economic woes.

To students who tried to make out a case for some help to tide over their own financial problems following the falling value of the ringgit, the prime minister was more blunt -- the government cannot afford to do this anymore.

And at a dinner hosted by the Sudanese business community here on the second day of his three-day visit here tonight, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was willing to remain poor "as long as we remain independent".

He said Malaysians were willing to tighten their belt although this was going to be difficult in the face of a shrinking world and globalisation and liberalisation being promoted aggressively.

According to him, one of the ways to remain poor was to be able to rebuild the Malaysian economy through more trade.

Dr Mahathir had earlier said that Malaysia, which has in the last decade before last year's financial crisis seen high growth rates, was expected to earn much less from tax collection, the main source of government revenue, this year.

"We are working hard, quite literally, to overcome our difficulties. Fortunately, our people understand the situation. They do not blame the government and they do not destabilise the country politically," he added.

He once again expressed confidence that Malaysia could avoid asking for aid from the International Monetary Fund which he likened to losing independence.

Dr Mahathir said rebuilding the economy was one of the ways to remain independent.

Striking a more positive note, he said that all was not lost.

He cited the emergence of large Malaysian corporations with expertise in engineering and construction of infrastructures including ports and airports as bright spots in the economy.

These firms could also build roads, bridges, public housing, telecommunication infrastructure and power generation and distribution.

Malaysia also offers and promotes services in the area of education and health care.

"We welcome more students from Sudan to pursue their higher education in our institutions of higher learning as we are embarking on the strategies to make Malaysia a centre of excellence for education in our region," said the prime minister.

-- BERNAMA

AU TS