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A final Xmas, a new dawn

TO all Christians this is the last Christmas for the century and the New Year marks the beginning of the Third Millennium. As we step over the threshold into the 21st century, let us reaffirm our commitment to uphold the Malaysian spirit of inter-faith understanding. In the wake of violent ethnic and religious conflicts in the world, the fragility of inter-ethnic ties cannot be under-estimated. Since the only certainty for the new millennium is change, the best bet for all of us is to work harder at ensuring that a place for every ethnic group under the Malaysian sun continues to be there well into the next century.

The message of caring for others - enshrined not only in Christianity but also in the other religions of the world - must continue to dominate our thoughts and actions. The future may bring about even greater and mind-boggling technological changes but the message - Love thy neighbour as thyself - will still be as relevant to citizens of the 21st Century as it was to early Christians 2,000 years ago.

That will give us the guidance and the reassurance we need as we tentatively welcome the winds of change that will soon hit the universe. Let us not forget our brothers and sisters who live on the fringes of society and the strong should help the weak as we negotiate our way in the unknown territory of the new millennium. Some of the familiar practices may have to make way for something totally new but if we hold on firmly to our spiritual and cultural beliefs we should be able to survive the journey.

That things are generally looking up in Malaysia is something which all Malaysians should be grateful about. Christmas is celebrated in Malaysia at a time when the economy is recovering strongly and political certainty is well on track. Businesses have picked up and some companies have reinstated some of the perks including monetary benefits which were withdrawn at the height of the economic crisis. After two years of belt-tightening it is nice to be spending again. Best of all, ethnic harmony has been unaffected by the financial crisis which swept the region, with far-reaching consequences.

And as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said in his Christmas message: "We should be thankful that Malaysians at large have been spared from undesirable consequences of the economic crisis which affected the region since 1997." He notes that Christmas celebrations in Malaysia have always been joyous because of the strong ethnic and religious harmony which is not at all jeopardised by the economic crisis.

The adoption of home-grown measures including capital controls have warded off attacks on the stock and currency markets by foreign manipulators. "Although others mostly belittle our capabilities, we've proven that with conviction we can accomplish whatever we set out to do. We should be proud of our capabilities. We have no need for foreign interference or tutelage in determining our destiny," said the Prime Minister.

Where the new millennium will take us depends largely on our willingness to understand the lessons of the past. Among other things, Malaysians must never start to take such things as unity and the spirit of brotherhood for granted. It is vital for us to draw from our diverse spiritual and cultural history the unchanging values which have stood the test of time and experience. Let us resolve to make Malaysia a better place for all.

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