

20 JUL 1999

Mahathir-Tears

DR MAHATHIR BREAKS DOWN AND CRIES OVER BUMI ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

ALOR SETAR, July 20 (Bernama) -- An emotionally overwhelmed Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had to shorten his speech at a school function here today as he lamented over the ever-widening gap between the scholastic achievements of Bumiputera students and their non-Bumiputera peers.

In between sobs and while trying to hold back more tears, the Prime Minister appealed to teachers to strive towards narrowing the gap in their students' academic performance.

The gap, if allowed to widen, would bode ill for the country politically in the future, he said when opening the Citibank Smart Lab at Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Sultanah Asma here.

"If we don't arrest this slide, there'll a come time when it can create racial jealousies and political instability subsequently.

"In terms of academic achievements, the Bumiputeras are still way behind," he said.

He said that Malaysia's cultural diversity contributed to the different levels of academic achievement of her multi-racial communities.

"While one community strives all out to master knowledge, another is easily swayed towards activities which don't require any thinking at all," he said.

Students of the latter community, for instance, were more bothered about holding demonstrations, he said.

Because of differing pre-occupation, the already academically-weak Bumiputera students get to be weaker still, ever widening the gap between their academic performance and that of their non-Bumiputera compatriots, he said.

At this juncture, a tearful Dr Mahathir chose to discontinue his speech and returned to the VIP dais where his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali was seen patting his back, obviously consoling him.

In the earlier part of his speech, Dr Mahathir emphasised that the key to safeguarding oneself from being at the mercy of the more learned people was mastery of knowledge, in particular, those Information Technology-related.

"We don't want to be left out and don't have to kowtow (to the more learned people)...it is for this reason the we give priority to IT education," he said.

Dr Mahathir said costly IT equipment made it impossible for the government to provide them to each and every school in the country.

As such, in this respect, the government highly appreciated contribution by companies such as Citibank although the number of equipment they donated was limited.

Dr Mahathir urged the students to make the most of the equipment saying: "We'll be the real losers if we put the equipment to waste...I therefore urge all students to make full use of them in mastering the sophisticated IT knowledge."

Dr Mahathir said it was also necessary for teachers themselves to master IT if the learning process were to effectively produce computer-literate students.

He said increasing IT applications for administrative, communications and commerce, among other uses, had made it tiresome to try to catch up with ever-improving and constantly upgraded IT capabilities.

As for E-commerce, the government would now have to monitor the key

players, the gainers and the losers involved for tax purposes or else it would incur substantial losses due to fraud, he said.

Therefore to avoid these losses and possible fraud, the government's mastery of IT was essential, he said.

At the function Dr Mahathir, on behalf of the school, received RM700,000 in sponsorship from Citibank Bhd Chief Executive Robert Matthews for building two multimedia computer labs and renovating the library for the school's 1,100 students.

The sponsorship, under Citibank's Cyberspace Education Programme, would enable Sekolah Menengah Kebangsaan Sultanah Asma, which was founded 75 years ago, to have access to computer-based education and qualify for smart school status.

The school is ranked as the the best girls' school in Kedah and among the top five schools in Malaysia by academic performance.

Matthews in his speech said the programme would provide selected schools with computer facilities to enable teachers and students participate in IT and cyberspace education.

"It is part of Citibank's community contribution programme which adopts the theme of banking on education," he said.

He added that Citibank firmly supported the government's vision for steering the nation towards achieving developed-nation status by year 2020 and recognised that education was an underpinning strategy for achieving Vision 2020.

Also present were Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak and Kedah Menteri Besar Tan Sri Sanusi Junid.

-- BERNAMA

TIM RYN