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PM calls for new strategies (HL)

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday called for new strategies to be devised to help the country face heightened challenges in the next millennium.

In launching the Second National Economic Consultative Council (NECC II), which will help chart Malaysia's development policy for the next 10 years, he said the 21st Century will bring with it many changes, not least globalisation and the cross-border free flow of trade, capital, workers, technology and information.

"This will present challenges in all aspects of our lives, whether it is the economy, society, education, commerce, industry or trade. We must draw up strategies that are different from previously, in order to face the current of globalisation and liberalisation," he said.

The Prime Minister urged the 155-member NECC II, to be chaired by Tan Sri Ahmad Sarji Abdul Hamid, to identify new activities that can contribute towards future economic growth.

"Information technology (IT), for example, can be used to develop new technology-based industries. In this regard the Multimedia Super Corridor has vast potential, and training in this field should be stepped up," he said.

Dr Mahathir also said industries based on composites used in motor vehicles and aircraft can make valuable contributions to Malaysia's manufacturing industry.

The agriculture sector, which has received relatively little focus as the nation industrialises, should also be given due attention, especially in respect of reducing dependence on food imports, the major cause of foreign exchange outflow and higher cost of living, he said.

"We have the skills to manage large estates, which is why we have succeeded with rubber, oil palm, and cocoa. If we venture into other crops in a big way, we will further develop the agriculture industry, not just to reduce food imports but also to export whatever excess after meeting domestic needs," the Prime Minister added.

Research and development (R and D) is also important for economic growth. Unfortunately, there is a lack of faith in the ideas, approaches and products that do not come from developed countries, he said.

"Generally, people are not willing to accept the approaches and inventions of their own countrymen, and because of this R and D is not attractive and fruitful. This attitude must be changed," Dr Mahathir said. While the focus of the New Economic Policy and National Development Policy was on creating Bumiputera entrepreneurs, it should now be on producing world-class Malaysian entrepreneurs.

"Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera entrepreneurs need to cooperate and strengthen their capabilities to face global challenges. If we are united we can create Malaysian entrepreneurs who are strong, competitive and resilient," Dr Mahathir said.

The Prime Minister said the NECC II should also look at how to increase Malaysia's productivity by enhancing the skills of its human resources; instil a culture of excellence among the people; and develop homegrown technologies and innovation.

He reminded the NECC II members that Vision 2020 remains a major national objective despite the setback caused by turmoil in the currency and stock markets.

As annual gross domestic product (GDP) growth of above 7 per cent was posted for close to a decade, progress towards Vision 2020 has not been jeopardised by the 1997 crisis, Dr Mahathir said.

An average 7 per cent growth a year until 2020 will bring the GDP to the targeted level of eight times that of 1990.

"Our experience in dealing with the economic downturn and recession can help us rebuild the economy towards Vision 2020. The turmoil has exposed many weaknesses in the management of our economy," Dr Mahathir said.

The Prime Minister stressed that there is no political motive behind the setting up of NECC II, and criticised Opposition parties which rejected the Government's invitation to participate in the council.

"This is an opportunity that should be accepted with an open heart.

Anyone who loves the country should put aside personal interests, including political beliefs. This is not the arena for that," Dr Mahathir said.

The council provides a forum to exchange views and opinions. It is also the right time and place where ideas about changes or reform can be debated and considered, he added.

The first meeting of the NECC II will be held today, and it will continue to meet throughout the next 12 months, before presenting a report to the Cabinet in September 2000.

* LIST OF NECC II MEMBERS: p4

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