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PM: Don't waste second chance to build up economy

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MALAYSIA has a second chance to build up its economy, and it is important that this is not wasted, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says.

Businesses must avoid their previous mistakes when taking advantage of the present economic recovery. They must have focus, be disciplined, and improve their management skills, he said.

"This is our second chance. Don't waste this opportunity. Don't do things that are not important or unnecessary," Dr Mahathir said when opening the 34th annual meeting of the Malay Chamber of Commerce in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

During a dialogue session after his speech, the Prime Minister said while banks are criticised for not disbursing more funds to the private sector, businessmen themselves must pay their debts on time to earn confidence and gain credit-worthiness.

Similarly, Bumiputera graduates who cannot find jobs have only themselves to blame for not pursuing studies which offer opportunities in professions that are in high demand, he said.

The number of Bumiputera students in science and technology-related majors is still very low compared to those who are majoring in religion, Bahasa Malaysia, geography, or history, he added.

Dr Mahathir said the Government can increase the quota for Bumiputera students in local universities, but if most of them stick to these traditional fields of study, or worse still, do not study and instead only take part in demonstrations against the Government, then they will not contribute towards the country's development.

Malaysia's unique economic policy has a social purpose, and that is to address the economic disparity among the races.

"Foreigners feel the New Economic Policy (NEP) discriminates against them because they are not offered opportunities when we privatize, claiming that they can do a better job.

"I don't deny that if we sell Telekom to AT&T or British Telecom, they will run it well. After all they have the money, expertise and strength. But the Government does not want to sell away the economy just to make money," he said.

Economic balance among the races must be achieved at all levels, from the petty traders up to the multi-millionaire industrialists. For this reason the Government monitors businessmen who are successful and gives them the chance to progress further, Dr Mahathir said.

"This is not favouritism... but assessing who can bring success to a privatization project. We look at those who have been around for some time, and have developed financially, and in terms of credit-worthiness and management expertise," he added.

The Prime Minister said foreigners, because they do not get these opportunities, make allegations of cronyism, nepotism, and corruption against the Government.

"To me, yes, I do help my cronies. My cronies are the 11 million Bumiputeras in the country. It is my responsibility to help them," he said.

When assistance is given to Malaysian companies, particularly during the economic crisis, the Government is then accused of bailing out weak entities which should be allowed to fail.

"They want to see blood on the streets. This is what they themselves say. Let them accuse us of cronyism and bailouts. We are not prepared to kill off our companies," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the International Monetary Fund wants countries receiving its financial aid to open up their economies completely to foreigners.

That it is controlled by the US, one of the strongest supporters of currency traders and free short-term capital flows, raises questions about the IMF as an independent body.

"I am not anti-American, only pro-Malaysian," he said.

To a question on e-commerce, Dr Mahathir said the new phenomenon has the potential to do more bad than good to Malaysia. There is no adequate protection against fraud or is there proper regulation for doing business over the Internet.

"The Government is still studying it, and we have not come up with a solution yet. This is a new challenge," he added.

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