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PM: We're not extravagant

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CYBERJAYA, Fri. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday strongly refuted suggestions that the Government had been financially "extravagant" building development projects such as Putrajaya and Cyberjaya.

He said as the country had enough money to finance the projects without having to borrow from outside, the Government could not be branded as being extravagant.

"We are not extravagant at all ... we spend what we have and not more than that," he told reporters during a press conference on the second day of the Multimedia Super Corridor's International Advisory Panel meeting here.

Dr Mahathir was asked to comment on criticism of the Government's decision to proceed with building high-profile projects such as the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang and in e-government.

"When we started this project (the MSC), we had a lot of money and were not going to borrow from anyone. In fact, until now we have not borrowed a sen," he said adding that the situation was the same with the development of Putrajaya and the KLIA.

He said the Government had also been fortunate because the projects had been budgeted for when the ringgit was still strong, at RM2.50 to the US dollar.

"So we did not use so much money. If we had to do it again now, it would have cost us twice as much. We have been lucky in that sense."

The Prime Minister also said that there had been no strain on the country's budget.

"We have enough money to pay for what we need. This country has been very conservative in its financial management, although people may not believe it."

As an analogy, he said: "A billionaire who spends a billion dollars is not extravagant, because he has the money. But a millionaire who spends a billion, is."

The Prime Minister said facilities such as the KLIA were not meant to be "monuments", but were for the beneficial use of the people, for the present and the future.

"We build things that we can use. And we don't build it just for today... just for the present Prime Minister's pleasure. We build it for the government of this country for the future... maybe a hundred years, two hundred years, two thousand years."

He added that if the Government planned for projects in the short term, it would constantly have to "dig up here and there" to try to put in what has been missed out.

Dr Mahathir said this was the reason why the Government decided to build the KLIA, which had been planned to cater for up to 125 million passengers in the next 100 years.

"If you build an airport, and you build it for the next five years, you will be in deep trouble because finding a site for a new airport is one of the most difficult things anywhere in the world. Just ask the Japanese," he quipped, prompting laughter among those present at the gathering.

"I don't know what kind of air travel there will be a hundred years from now, but at least we have space. You cannot move airports every now and then," he said.

On the implementation of electronic government, Dr Mahathir said the move into this domain was "to keep up with the trends."

"There is no doubt that in the future most governments will have to turn electronic, we cannot have old ways of doing government work anymore because we will be left behind if we do not change the way we carry out our administration," he said.

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