

01/01/1999

PM: 1998 year of problems, successes (HL)

Ramlan Said

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Despite it being a year full of problems for the country, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Malaysians have a right to be proud and grateful for the many successes achieved throughout 1998.

The economic problems plaguing the country had started to show signs of recovery, the Prime Minister said, adding that with stability and peace, the various measures taken would yield the desired results.

Describing 1998 as the most challenging year for Malaysians and the country, Dr Mahathir said: "God willing, if we remain resolute, maintain peace and stability and co-operate to ensure the success of measures to revive the economy, we will succeed and our independence will continue to be meaningful."

In his New Year message over RTM tonight, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia not only had to grapple with the economic crisis which began in 1997 but also on the political front following the refusal of the former Deputy Prime Minister to accept his removal.

He said the country had experienced recessions in 1985 and 1986 and a political crisis in 1987 but they were not as bad as those occurring this year.

Paying tribute to Malaysians, Dr Mahathir said the majority of them had persevered in the face of the economic problems, not falling easy prey to attempts by foreigners to create disturbances and disharmony.

He said although inflation had gone up, it was under control as there were no unreasonable demands for wage increase or strikes and other industrial actions by workers and their unions.

Dr Mahathir listed the opening of the Kuala Lumpur International Airport in Sepang; the staging of the best ever Commonwealth Games at a sophisticated and modern sports complex; and the completion of the world's tallest building, the Petronas Twin Towers, as the year's highlights.

He also noted the exemplary performance of the Malaysian athletes in the Commonwealth Games.

It is true that during the beginning of the airport's operations, we faced problems but it was only for a week whereas the new airports elsewhere could not operate for months after their opening and suffered huge losses, he said.

Dr Mahathir said critics may claim that these projects were a waste of funds but events later proved that millions of ringgit had been saved as the facilities were built not only when the country had sufficient funds but also when the value of the ringgit was higher.

Reminding Malaysians on the challenges of the 21st century, the Prime Minister said it was fortunate that the country was not so weak that it had to seek assistance from foreign capitalists.

But Dr Mahathir cautioned that attempts to re-colonise the country would continue to be made, saying that certain forces would use all means to divide and control Malaysia.

"Their leaders and the media, traders, international agencies (under their control), rating agencies and their banks will do anything to realise this aim."

He said these quarters had accused Malaysia of not being transparent, practising crony capitalism and nepotism, having no respect for the laws, being undemocratic and refusing to listen to demands from street protesters.

But he felt it would be more accurate to direct the criticism against the accusers.

Dr Mahathir said at first, foreign powers denied that their main aim was to re-colonise the country but now, their leaders and media had openly called on Malaysians to bring down the Government and replace it with leaders of their choice.

Dr Mahathir spoke at length on the events which led to the economic crisis, especially on the role of currency traders and speculators in destabilising the economies of the region.

"The international community does not care about our plight. We have appealed to the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the governments of developed countries to curtail the activities of currency traders and speculators.

"They ignored our appeals but blame us and say that we are not transparent and practised nepotism and cronyism. Actually these international agencies are merely tools of Western countries to again control countries that were once their colonies."

Realising that the fate of Malaysia rested in the hands of Malaysians, Dr Mahathir said the Government introduced measures to prevent the ringgit and the stock exchange from being manipulated continuously.

He said the positive results of these could be seen from the revival of the Kuala Lumpur Stock Exchange and the increase in the country's reserve.

"Total recovery is not possible as the economies of almost all our trading partners, in fact the whole world, are on the decline."

On the currency and capital controls, Dr Mahathir said they would not be eased until the Government had fully studied any currency trading regulations introduced by developed countries, such as the G7 which had announced its intention to do so.

"We can be happy that our views made known earlier are beginning to be accepted by developed countries which control the world's capital market. But we must remember that they are looking at this problem from their viewpoint - their loss is because currency traders have suffered losses and not because they have come under attack."

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