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Remain united in resolve, PM calls (HL)

CONFIDENT the Government can overcome the economic problems before the end of the year, the Prime Minister called on Malaysians last night to refrain from any attempt that might frustrate the recovery efforts.

In his Hari Raya Aidilfitri message, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he believes the country will be able to return to its former economic strength in a short time if every Malaysian is united in their resolve and direction.

"I am confident the economic problems will subside by the turn of the 21st century. I urge the people not to try to frustrate the Government's efforts but to strive harder instead to revive all economic activities," Dr Mahathir said.

He said it was clear that Malaysia has weathered the regional economic storm well. While the domestic economy has yet to recover from the crisis that started in mid-1997, the people could still afford to celebrate the Hari Raya in a joyous mood.

"I believe this is because Malaysians are rational, cool and not easily swayed," he added.

Paying further tribute to the people, the Prime Minister said Malaysians have been very disciplined and patient in facing the economic difficulties. They are willing to sacrifice and to work even harder to increase productivity.

"On the whole, the people have been solidly behind the Government. That is why the efforts by some quarters to destroy the economy and make us submit to them have failed," he said.

The Government, on its part, regained control of the ringgit - which was being traded indiscriminately and in ways harmful to the Malaysian economy - by way of the currency exchange rate controls imposed in early September.

"The Government acted to block (the currency traders) from owning ringgit to buy and sell. Godwilling, we have succeeded in doing that," Dr Mahathir said.

Government policies such as the New Economic Policy (NEP) have also helped. "Because the NEP has succeeded in distributing the country's wealth fairly among the various races, the economic crisis did not make us lose our minds, stage riots, or become violent."

All these have enabled the country to maintain a conducive environment for investment. The business climate has continued to improve and the unemployment rate has been kept low. In fact no Malaysian who is prepared to work would be unemployed.

The Prime Minister said the economic problems can be overcome easily and quickly with greater effort and productivity. And the chances of recovery have become even better with the success of government measures to free the country from currency speculators and stock market manipulators.

What is also important now is for Malaysians ensure peace and harmony in their country. Dr Mahathir said Muslims in this country must not make enemies out of one another. "This would not only be detrimental to the country's progress but also the Muslim world as a whole."

He said Muslims in Malaysia should be thankful as they are able to celebrate the Aidilfitri in peace and relative prosperity.

In other countries they observe the day in fear of being attacked with bombs and missiles, or they are forced to go to war to defend themselves,

and suffer from hunger as a result of economic embargo imposed deliberately to deny them and their children food and medicine.

He urged Muslims to seize every opportunity provided by the Government so as to achieve progress for themselves as well as nation, and also to restore the Islamic glory.

"We cannot sit and watch while others march on in progress. We cannot be satisfied with our achievements and successes so far. We cannot allow others to always be ahead of us. Others should try to keep up with us instead."

Dr Mahathir also touched on the main challenge awaiting the Muslim community in the 21st century - the elimination of borders in the name of globalisation; even if this is limited to movement of capital and not people.

With globalisation, Muslims and their countries could be exposed to dangers. "If Muslims continue to have conflicts among themselves, reject modern technology and knowledge and remain disorganised, they will not be able to overcome such dangers."