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Studies come first, Mahathir tells varsity students

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday drove home the point to Malaysian university students that their focus and responsibility now should be towards their studies, so that they can later contribute to the country's development.

Speaking to a packed gathering of more than 4,000 students from 11 public and four private sector institutions of higher learning in Bangi yesterday, he said it is up to the future generation to ensure Malaysia's continued success and independence.

"Independence is meaningless if it does not bring with it changes that will lead towards development.

"That is why we emphasise so much on education to help those who are left behind, particularly the Bumiputera and Malays," Dr Mahathir said. The gathering was described as an opportunity for direct contact between Dr Mahathir and university students, a group that has been lately perceived to be anti-Government. This is partly due to the participation of some university students in demonstrating against the sacking of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

The more than two-hour gathering included a closed-door question and answer session between the Prime Minister and the students.

Speaking at a news conference later, Dr Mahathir said he told the students that they can follow political developments in the country but should only be active in politics after they have graduated and began working.

"Only after completing their studies should they get involved, directly or indirectly, in national politics to influence the way the country is administered," he said.

Dr Mahathir said other issues raised during the dialogue included students' welfare, financial assistance, corruption and the country's administration of political, economic and social matters.

In his speech earlier, Dr Mahathir said during the recent crisis, there have been attempts by outsiders to recolonise the country through economic means and they almost succeeded. It is up to the future generation to ensure this never happens.

"Even some foreign leaders have tried to topple the Government, and it doesn't matter that they come from the most powerful nation, we are not willing to give in. We are prepared to leave only if the people decide so in an election," he added.

Dr Mahathir said in the post-Independence years, about 20 per cent of the Government's budget went to provide education for Malaysians. It is a shame, therefore, if these opportunities are not properly utilised.

He said this is why, unlike some Opposition parties, the Barisan Nasional has tried to keep politics out of the universities, so that students are not distracted from their studies.

Dr Mahathir said the Government not only allocated scholarships but also subsidised all students of higher learning institutions.

"This is because the fees Bumiputera and non-Bumiputera students pay is only one-tenth of the universities' actual expenses.

Dr Mahathir said he kept himself away from universities in recent years because he planned to withdraw from politics and the Government. Instead he left it to his potential successor then (Anwar) to get close to all sectors of society, including students, Umno and state leaders.

"I planned to step down in 1997. I am already old and was approaching 73 then. But then the country was attacked by currency speculators, I felt that I needed to postpone my retirement," he added.

Dr Mahathir explained the Government's unorthodox measures to tackle the economic crisis, and how the measures have now received worldwide acknowledgement for their success.

The Prime Minister said as a leader he is prepared to listen to comments and criticisms made by all parties. Praises alone can cause delusions that one cannot make any mistakes, when actually it may be harmful to themselves, the country and people.

Meanwhile, asked if more dialogues with students will be held, Dr Mahathir said there is a need to fill the gap between the information being fed to the students and what is actually happening in the country.

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