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#### Why more highways needed

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Developing countries need to build more roads to enable rural folks to take part in development, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister said this was contrary to the approach of developed nations where governments believed the era of big highway projects had ended.

The new thinking and trend was to manage what they had instead of building more, he said opening the XXIst World Road Congress at the Putra World Trade Centre.

Dr Mahathir, who is overseas, was represented by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who delivered his speech.

Abdullah also launched a set of commemorative stamps.

The congress and exhibition, attended by some 2,200 delegates and 300 participating companies from 25 countries, is jointly organised by the World Road Association and the Malaysian Government.

It is the oldest international association in the field of road and highway technologies with 92 member countries.

Dr Mahathir said a transport policy needed to strike a balance between three key issues - the environment, the economy and user preferences.

"The dilemma facing many developing countries is to balance development and environment. Construction of roads, especially new ones, will directly or indirectly create environmental effect."

At the Rio Summit in 1992, it was agreed that rich nations must be prepared to pay poor countries so they would not cut down trees for development.

"But as we all know, their contribution is not forthcoming. Yet they relentlessly condemn those who have little choice but to exploit their few natural resources."

Dr Mahathir said the need to protect the environment should be viewed in a balanced perspective and due emphasis placed on promoting economic growth and sustainable development, including eradication of poverty, meeting basic needs and enhancing the quality of life.

The responsibility for ensuring a better environment should be equitably shared and the ability of developing countries to respond must be taken into account.

The Prime Minister said roads and other modes of transportation represented the key to enhance the quality of life.

"However, it must be recognised that construction of roads on its own must not be taken in isolation.

"More often than not, the road is not only the investment needed and complementary investments are equally important to bring about the desired impact."

Touching on road crashes which had become a major issue as a result of improvements in the road system, Dr Mahathir said the situation was bad. In developing countries it had been estimated that 350,000 people died in road crashes every year.

This represents 70 per cent of those killed on roads throughout the world.

Dr Mahathir said the matter was also of major concern in Malaysia where statistics had revealed an increase in the number of road fatalities from 4,048 people in 1990 to 6,302 in 1997.

"Such a depressing trend has motivated the Malaysian Government to set a target of 30 per cent reduction in deaths by next year."

Reminding the delegates that roads represented a huge accumulated national investment, Dr Mahathir said they must be maintained carefully for future generations.

The philosophy of good maintenance must be revisited and the notion that prevention was to take priority over repair given due consideration.

"With limited financial resources allocated for road maintenance, engineers should concentrate on identifying technology that can extend the service life of road infrastructure," he added.

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