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Get involved in business, Govt urges Bumiputeras

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DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who once dabbled in the satay business, knows full well how tough it can be to make it in the retail industry.

The Prime Minister admitted that he got his fingers burned in more ways than one in the venture. Painful as the experience was, he at least came away with the lesson that it takes more than just a good product, and hard work, to run a successful business.

"It is more than just preparing the food. Without proper business skills, one might as well jump from a tall building," he said in his address before having a dialogue session with the Bumiputera traders in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Dr Mahathir said that while the retail sector is admittedly a tough sector, with its own host of problems, there is no reason why it should be dominated by one community or another.

The Government wants Bumiputeras to be more active in this business not only because of the sector's potential but it also feels that the present situation is not socially healthy.

As it is, retail businesses in new townships tend to be monopolised by one ethnic group, which indicates that race is still identified with economic activities, he said.

"This is not good... if we have separation and ghettos, it will lead to social problems," Dr Mahathir said, noting that the retail industry as it stands is not reflective of the country's racial composition of 60 per cent Bumiputeras, 26 per cent Chinese, 10 per cent Indians and 4 per cent others.

It appears that Bumiputeras are put off by the challenges that industry poses, preferring to vie for contracts, projects and approved permits instead, he added.

Still, the Government has come up with various measures to promote Bumiputera participation, including through franchising schemes.

Here, the important work such as brand identification and interior decoration have already been taken care of and all that the entrepreneur needs is a little management expertise and capital.

Mini-markets, bakeries, confectioneries and photo shops are but a few examples where franchising can help to restructure the industry, Dr Mahathir pointed out.

There are many more businesses that can come under the system and the National Economic Action Council is looking into the matter and its related issues.

For example, ex-military personnel and other groups who are keen and eligible to run businesses in new townships can be identified and offered the opportunities, including training and capital.

For other industries, the manufacture of child parts is being encouraged given the ready market for them.

On their part, Bumiputera traders must be responsible about the loans they obtain and work hard to cultivate a good relationship with the banks, the Prime Minister said.

"Borrowers should be good paymasters. They must be serious in managing their money and have a comprehensive record on credit coming in and going out," he added.

Earlier when opening the two-day Malaysian Structural Steel Association's convention and meeting, Dr Mahathir urged local contractors

to discard their inferiority complex and start venturing abroad on their own, instead of continuing to depend on government assistance.

He said Malaysian businessmen have become too comfortable at home "where everything is familiar and the sympathetic Government is ever ready to help".

"Our businessmen must learn to work under less congenial conditions. No matter what form globalisation takes, it is important that Malaysians learn to compete, both at home and abroad," he said.

Emulate the South Koreans, he urged local contractors, by going for more and more overseas jobs.

"There is no reason why Malaysians cannot bid for construction work even in the developed countries. We have the capabilities and we can achieve world standards," he said.

Noting that Malaysia would have much to benefit when Malaysians undertake construction contracts in foreign countries, Dr Mahathir said remittances of earnings and profits can help towards realising the nation's ambition of becoming a developed country by 2020.

"In the petroleum industry, our engineers and workers are already active worldwide, including countries like Sudan, Chad and Algeria.

"Thus, there is no reason why construction companies should not follow them. The important thing, apart from delivering quality work, is to team up with locals and to be prepared to transfer your skills and technology," he said.

He also invited Malaysian road builders to bid for a contract to build roads in Jamaica.

"I am told by visitors to Malaysia how impressed they are with the Malaysian roads... They are to have Malaysian road builders build their roads," he said.

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