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Mahathir-Initiative

MALAYSIA READY FOR SECOND STEP INTO INFORMATION AGE

KUALA LUMPUR, March 8 (Bernama) -- Malaysia is now ready for the second step into the Information Age to be called "Strategic Initiative One" of the 21st century, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

"If Vision 2020 was the first strategic step into the information age, Malaysia is now ready for the second step. We are now ready for a concerted, comprehensive and committed quantum leap which will remake Malaysian corporations and reinvent Malaysian society," he said when opening the Second Global Knowledge Conference (GK II) here.

The GK II, which attracted about 1,200 delegates from about 120 countries from all over the world, will discuss and explore ways to bridge the widening gap between the "information haves" and the "information have nots" of the world.

GK II, which focuses on key issues of access, empowerment and governance, is a member of the global knowledge partnership formed after the inaugural Knowledge for Development in the Information Age Conference in Toronto in 1997.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia's Strategic Initiative One did not mean the abandonment of the country's industrial backbone which today contributes more than 37 per cent of Malaysia's growth domestic product and which also provides 30 per cent of all jobs.

"We are among the most industrialised economies on earth and we are not going to fall down the industrial ladder, no matter how many will try to push or pull us off.

"We are also one of the most open economies in the world. We live and we die on trade," he said, adding that over 85 per cent of Malaysia's exports last year were manufactured goods.

As such, the prime minister said the basic structure of the Malaysian economy would not be fundamentally altered in the short and medium term.

He also spoke of Malaysia's shift into knowledge economy (k-economy) where the knowledge content and the knowledge contribution would see a quantum leap in every area.

With the shift, he said, the Malaysian economy and the Malaysian society would not be quite the same again.

Dr Mahathir said for the Information Age and K-economy "we must have a first rate national media system where the internet and other IT innovations must be a large and critical part of these national media system.

"This country must most seriously enhance the production and supply of information, knowledge and wisdom and assure their accessibility to all our people in every area of work.

"We must work hard on the demand side, always making sure that we ensure the need priority with regard to access," he said.

Functional literacy must be broadened to all including the very old, he said.

"We must aim for hundred per cent basic IT literacy. We must vigorously build on our language skill whether it be in English, or Arabic, Malay or Mandarin, Tamil, Thai or Tagalog," he said.

Dr Mahathir said there will also be a need for reforms in the private and public sectors where the ancient and hallowed "sulit syndrome" (secrecy) must be done away with.

"The traditional Great Information Hoard which operates within the

corporation, the university, the civil service, quite understandable in an information and accessibility poor environment, which makes knowledge that extra important and therefore, that extra valuable, to be coveted, hidden and hoarded must be killed," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the private and public sectors would need to operate according to new rules of transparency, new regulations for disclosure, new processes of corporate and public sector governance.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia was fortunate to have a comparatively less problem with regards to the brain drain than the vast majority of developing countries.

He, however, said the country must bring back outstanding Malaysians who have matured elsewhere.

He said the time was not far when Malaysia must set the target of reducing the number of foreign workers by 100,000 per year and reducing the number of unskilled and low knowledge workers by 95,000 annually while enriching the country's economy and society at the same time through an annual infusion of 5,000 extra ordinary world citizens of extra ordinary talent, creativity and other capabilities.

Dr Mahathir also talked about three great divides within the economically rich and the materially poor, between the information and knowledge rich and the information and knowledge poor, and between those who were information and knowledge empowered and those who are information and knowledge disenfranchised.

"In many countries, this is the most urgent issue to address, and the most difficult and the most critical for no society can move forward as a cohesive social community if the vast majority are left behind," he said.

Dr Mahathir said it would take a miracle to prevent a massive widening of the knowledge and the economic gap between the rich and poor in the years ahead.

He said despite all the progress made by mankind, the massive advances in the liberation and empowerment of mankind, there was no denying that never before in the history of man the world witnessed so many people living in abject and absolute poverty.

"The Information Age that is upon us hold out the promise of a new world of shared prosperity and a global renaissance. At the same time, it also holds out the danger of economic exploitation, societal devastation and the era of imperialism and colonialism," he added.

-- BERNAMA

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