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PM: We view Hong Kong more as partner than competitor

Baidura Ahmad in Hong Kong

HONG KONG, Sun. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad does not see Malaysia as a competitor to Hong Kong, but more as a partner.

The Prime Minister was asked about the possibility of Malaysia competing with Hong Kong in attracting foreign direct investments in information and communications technology.

"We are not really a competitor to Hong Kong. But we would like to co-operate. We like to see Hong Kong as a partner rather than a competitor. We prefer to work together in similar projects in other countries," Dr Mahathir said at a Press conference yesterday.

Dr Mahathir was here to address a luncheon at the Asia Society.

"We have our own strengths while Hong Kong has its own. We know that a lot of Hong Kong companies are involved in IT. So our MSC (Multi-media Super Corridor) is a good place to locate their businesses.

"This is not a far-fetched idea and I am sure some Hong Kong companies will come to the MSC."

Apart from the ICT sector, Hong Kong businessmen and industrialists are also expected to invest in Malaysia following Dr Mahathir's one-on-one meeting with several Hong Kong movers and shakers, including billionaire Li Ka-shing.

Li, who built his fortune in shipping and property, is one of Hong Kong's most prominent businessmen with his business interests ranging from retail (Watson's stores), telecommunications (Metro Radio), to power generation (Hongkong Electric).

Recently, Li, through Hutchison Maritime Terminal, signed an agreement to acquire a substantial stake in Westport, a local port operator.

"Mr Li Ka-shing has a definite interest in ports in Malaysia.

"Others I met were businessmen who are interested and they already have some investment interests in Malaysia."

Asked to elaborate on his recommendation in his speech earlier for the setting up of an Asian Association for Development, Dr Mahathir said the idea was not too different from the East Asian Economic Caucus.

"This is because for EAEC, people get very uncomfortable.

"Then why not have an association."

In his speech at the gala dinner, Dr Mahathir said an Asian Association for Development should be set up to enable Asian countries to interact, discuss common problems and to co-operate where necessary.

At the dinner, attended by more than 1,000 members and associates of the Asia Society, including American expatriates, Dr Mahathir was introduced by chairman Ronnie Chan as "one of the most misunderstood persons in the world."

Saying that he admired Dr Mahathir's guts in standing firm on Malaysia's own cure for its economic problems despite worldwide condemnation, he added that history would prove to be on Dr Mahathir's side.

Before he took to the stage on Saturday night, Dr Mahathir was told by the organisation's Hong Kong centre chairman that he had good and bad news for him.

"First the bad news, the bad one is that people are still writing not so nice things about you and I suspect they will continue to do so but it doesn't matter because history is not written in three to five years.

"The good news, in my opinion, is that in time when people begin to look back with the benefit of hindsight and also allow the economy of the world

to turn a whole circle, economically, socially and financially, then I believe, Dr Mahathir, history will treat you a lot better than what people treat you today," said Chan before inviting him to deliver his speech.

Dr Mahathir was invited last year by the Asia Society to speak in the United States on using capital controls for financial stability.

The high profile New York-based Asia Society, which has a centre here, is dedicated to fostering understanding of Asia and communication between Americans and the peoples of Asia and the Pacific.

During a 15-minute Q&A, Dr Mahathir answered queries which must have sounded familiar to the Prime Minister whenever he faced foreign audience abroad in the post-Asian economic crisis days.

He was asked about his retirement plans to which he answered: "I would like to take a rest."

On whether the pegging of the ringgit to the US dollar will be removed, Dr Mahathir again gave a familiar answer: "It is not necessary as it is not doing anybody any harm."

An American asked Dr Mahathir for his views on young Malaysian professionals abroad who insisted that the Malaysian Government "is not run the way it should be."

Dr Mahathir's response: "They are quite naive. When you are young, you tend to be very idealistic and say that you want to change all the old people in the Government. "But I can assure you that the moment they take over the Government, somebody will tell them exactly the same.

"Everyone on their first day at university will say they know how to run a country correctly. I rather suspect that when they become part of the Government, they will do exactly the same."

Asked to compare Bank Negara's involvement in the currency market several years ago and the attacks by the rogue currency traders during the 1997 crisis, Dr Mahathir said the situation was different as the central bank only took position in the developed nations' currencies.

"That would have no effect because (Bank Negara) cannot manipulate the market as the reserves of these countries are strong."

He added that it was a different case for the currency traders as they attacked currencies of developing nations which had relatively very small reserves.

Dr Mahathir was also asked about the chances of Asia leading in technological advancement which is today dominated by the West.

"I visited the US recently and I found that most of the experts and the head researchers are people from this part of the region.

"They are Indians, Koreans and very few Caucasians.

"I think they are (the ones) depending on us," he said to loud applause from the audience.

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