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PM's lively and frank discussion with our students in UK

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TWO meetings with two groups of students in two continents within two months - that's what Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad did.

I had the good fortune to be present at both: one in Chicago last month and the second in Manchester, England, on Friday.

The meetings started with the PM addressing the crowd, and this was followed by a question and answer session. On both occasions, the session turned out to be lively and frank. Some of our students have grown in maturity and raised issues in an articulate manner.

In Manchester, the PM gave a short address, preferring to hear comments and take in questions from the crowd. There's a sizeable student population in the Manchester area, with recent arrivals of some 30 post-graduate students with their family members.

When he arrived, Dr Mahathir was immediately shown the stage, where a Malaysian flag gave the gathering a distinctly Malaysian flavour. A bespectacled student in his late 20s or early 30s, Zainal Abidin, acted as Master of Ceremonies and this was followed by welcoming remarks by a girl in a sarong kebaya, Nurlena Quadra.

Nurlena is vice president of the Malaysian Student Society, speaking confidently and clearly with a trace of an English accent. The lecture hall was slowly being filled as more students arrived.

The exchanges between the PM and the students were warm and friendly. When he entered the hall, the students rose and gave him a standing ovation. I was told by a colleague that when the PM addressed another group of students in London about a year ago, the crowd was rather cold and appeared antagonistic.

Was this due to what the PM referred to as the politics of hate, a campaign to abuse and sow the seeds of hatred on the ruling Government and its leaders mounted by the Opposition? Dr Mahathir made repeated reference to this in his key speeches on this working trip to the UK, as he did when he met US-based students in Chicago last month.

But in Manchester and Chicago, the students listened attentively and respectfully. There was an air of expectancy in the crowd but Dr Mahathir's opening remarks set the tone for the discussions later. "When I left the country a few days ago, it was in good shape," he quipped, and the students applauded.

He then gave a run down of the latest happenings in Government, particularly on the state of the nation's economy. While the Government continues to strengthen the recovery, Dr Mahathir lamented the politicking that still persists in some sections of the society, well after the November general election.

The students wanted his views on the oil royalty situation in Malaysia, particularly the payments to Terengganu, the involvement of some students in what one medical student at the university referred to as "extreme politics", the last general election which saw the ruling coalition returned to power on the strength of Chinese voters and the future of aeronautical industry in Malaysia.

The last question came from a student who wanted to know what kind of financial remuneration could the students hope when they return to Malaysia. The question was asked because the student said working overseas gave them a superior pay packet, something which everyone wanted.

Dr Mahathir's response to this was: "Of course everyone wants a high

salary. But you must remember that such high salaries can only come from a developed country. At the moment, we can't afford it. We can't give out salaries like those being offered in countries like the US. But if students like you return home and serve the country, help to develop it, then I'm sure we can pay better salaries."

What was encouraging from these dialogues is the students' willingness to engage the PM in an open dialogue. The PM had shown that he was not averse to "difficult" questions and that his explanations to the more serious questions bore close study and consideration.

Some of the negative news being spread on the country and its leaders serves no one, much less the student population who should seek an insight into current affairs away from just one particular source - unfriendly and inaccurate websites.

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