

19/04/2000

US help for k-economy (HL)

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PUTRAJAYA, Tues. - American companies, responding to Malaysia's needs, will help train locals to propel the country towards a knowledge economy.

US-Malaysia Business Committee chairman Michael Stephen said this was conveyed to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at a 90-minute meeting today.

The committee comes under the ambit of the US-Asean Business Council.

"We heard a call from the Prime Minister for a focused effort to develop k-economy in Malaysia.

"We are going to create practical training exchange programmes involving Malaysian students and private sector representatives working in US companies," he said.

This will include new ideas, capital and technology.

Stephen, who is also Aetna International chairman and Malaysia-US Business Council co-chair, said the objective of the initiative was to "foster the development of knowledge workers".

This, he said, was also to honour the late Datuk Alex Lee, who held the Malaysia co-chair of the Malaysia-US Business Council. Lee, who was a former National Unity and Social Development deputy minister, died in a scuba diving accident last November.

A US-Asean Business Council delegation comprising 47 senior executives from 24 American companies had a series of meetings with members of the Cabinet and Malaysian business leaders over the past two days to discuss how they could help advance the country's economic priorities.

Stephen said the council had been holding discussions with the Prime Minister's office for some time now on how American businesses could help improve the relationship between both countries and continue to make Malaysia the prime area of investment.

He said the council had also presented to Dr Mahathir a number of initiatives addressing other key areas during today's meeting.

"We see tourism as an important step that will go very far in helping co-operation between our countries and companies.

"So in co-operation with the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism as well as the Malaysian Tourism Promotions Board, the council, led by American Express and Starwood Hotels and Resorts Worldwide Inc all represented here today, will underwrite a comprehensive study of tourism in Malaysia with recommendations on the way forward," he said.

Stephen said among other things, the council would develop projects and raise the profile of Malaysia as the premier tourism destination for US residents.

The second initiative, he said, was to help Malaysia develop its hi-tech Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs).

The council will also provide assistance in developing venture capitalism.

Towards this, the council will support a trade mission with key officials of US hi-tech SMEs to visit hi-tech centres in Malaysia.

"The council will also identify and organise a trip for hi-tech SMEs and venture capitalists from Malaysia to meet their counterparts in the US," he said.

Asked when all these initiatives would begin, Stephen said they should start by September.

"It is now in the discussion stage... we will be coming back in

September and, by then, hopefully all the preliminary work would have been done," added Stephen.

On Dr Mahathir's response to the initiatives, Stephen said the Prime Minister seemed to be "very pleased".

"He was very receptive and very pleased with the discussions he had with the council... my impression is that he was very pleased. But I think you should ask him."

Asked how such a collaboration would benefit both parties, Stephen said: "It is going to benefit both because we are living in an inter-dependent world.

"And if we can understand that, really understand that, it will have a significant impact on our productivity... and we will understand that we are part of a very, very difficult part of an economy that needs commitment from both sides."

Stephen said such collaboration was important as no company in the world could boast of having a surplus of talented people although there was almost full employment in most countries.

He said the co-operation would help the lifestyles and income of the people of both countries.

More importantly, he added it would help strengthen the bond between them.

"I asked the Prime Minister what advise he will give us business people in the US and he said, `let us get to know each other better. When you know people, you trust people and when you trust people, you want to do business with them'.

"That is one of the big lessons Asia has taught the rest of the world... and we want to exploit that," added Stephen.

Among the American members of the council are former US Trade Representative Ambassador Carla Hill, former Secretary of State Dr Henry Kissinger, chairman and CEO of the American International Group Maurice Greenberg, Oracle Corporation president Ray Lane, Caltex chairman John McKenzie, Boeing Company president Harry Stonecipher, Coca Cola Company president Michael Daft and Mike Houterman president of Hughes Space and Communications International.

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