

LUXURY OF CHOICE

STAR 31 AUG 2001

We live in a land of opportunity, says PM

By SA'ODAH ELIAS

PETALING JAYA: Malaysia is a land of opportunity and it is up to the people to choose whether to make the best of what the country has to offer and prosper or otherwise.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said unlike people in other developing countries, Malaysians had the luxury of choice.

"The opportunities are there. They can choose to work or to be unemployed, to live in proper homes or remain in squatter houses, to live in hardship or to prosper.

"Those who deny this fact are an ungrateful lot, the same as those who refused to admit to our successes, including the fact that we have been recognised by most Muslim nations as a model Islamic country," he said in his National Day message.

He said the people who still lived in this state of denial, and those who made a big issue about poor Malaysians just to ignore the level of

development achieved by the country thus far, should instead ask themselves why that was so when over two million foreigners flocked to Malaysia to make a better life for themselves.

He also called on all Malaysians to reject any form of external interference in the running of the country and to defend the country's independence.

"Ours is a democratic country. Only Malaysians have the right to decide who is to lead this beloved country and no one else.

"Many countries which criticised us in 1998 for not being democratic and unfair are now trying to mend fences with us. Certain issues are no longer brought up by them and most have acknowledged that we hold fast to the rule of law and that our laws do not discriminate against anyone," he added.

Dr Mahathir said countries, which had hoped to see the demise of the present government to open the way for their candidate of choice to lead the

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country, today realised that if such a thing happened, the only group that would benefit would be the extremists who misused religion for their political agenda.

The reality that such a group would be much less friendly towards them compared to the present government, he said, had made these countries ease off their pressure on Malaysia.

He said Malaysians had a lot to be thankful for compared to others in a similar position.

"We should feel happy that

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on the day the country celebrates its 44th year of independence, the majority of Malaysians know the actual meaning of being thankful. They are grateful for the peace, stability and racial harmony achieved by the country.

"They appreciate the fact that our economy is still good and we are free from the domination of foreign agencies and powers," he added.

More than that, he said, Malaysians could look forward to a stronger economy, especially with the increase in the arrival of foreign tourists.

He said that in the first four months of this year, the num-

ber of tourist arrivals exceeded one million a month and most of them, who were from the Arab countries, tended to stay longer than those from other parts of the world.

Foreign relations, said Dr Mahathir, were also showing positive improvement and the total number of foreign missions in the country exceeded 100.

He also took to task political leaders who used Islam to make the people hate the present Government and its leaders by saying that they were unIslamic.

"To these leaders, this is only a political strategy to

defeat their opponents, but there are many among their supporters who really believe them and are willing to use force and violence to topple the Government.

"To these groups, the setting up of a truly Islamic state cannot be achieved through the democratic process and they are willing to kill and draw support from foreign fanatical groups to achieve their objective," he said.

Dr Mahathir said because of what they had done, these people now had to face the law of the country, but the people who instigated and were indirectly responsible for the acts

of violence perpetrated by these groups managed to get away.

"For 44 years we have been independent. We should be proud of our achievement. And in conjunction with the celebrations, let us renew our commitment to be united in developing and defending our country, irrespective of whether we are bumiputra or non-bumiputra.

"Malaysia is our country and our right. Let us all defend and protect it so that we will continue to develop, be independent and free and be respected by the world," he said.