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Inspired to stand tall in a world where nothing really is all that fair

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ONCE upon a time, a young doctor who saved up enough money, visited Japan in 1961 and was inspired by the spirit of "never say die" of an Asian race to rebuild their country from the ravages of war.

This man decided that if the Japanese could show what they've got and emerge to be a powerful economy which could boast of some of the most superior products the world had ever known, then his own people could too.

So when he became the Prime Minister of his country in 1981, this Singapore-trained doctor whom everybody the world over know as Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, began the process of rapid industrialisation of his country, known the world over as Malaysia.

It was a story of inspiration which Dr Mahathir related to Japanese scholars, businessmen and parliamentarians as well as Malaysian students in Japan, although not in this fabled form.

It had to be told because it appeared that the Japanese had not forgotten his Look East Policy and wanted to know if Malaysia was still looking to Japan for inspiration.

It was a story that had to be told to Malaysian students in Japan to give them the confidence to be the best they could so that they could return home and give the best they could to continue the process of development to help the country achieve a developed status by 2020.

Dr Mahathir was in Tokyo for a two-day working visit during which he delivered the inaugural lecture of the U Thant series of the United Nations University, conferred an honorary doctorate by the Meiji University, delivered a keynote address at the Seventh Nikkei International Conference, visited the NTT Musashino research and development Centre and met students.

Dr Mahathir's love story with Japan is legendary.

Indeed, it was not unrequited. When Malaysia's Look East Policy took off in the early 80s, Japan responded favourably and encouragingly, helping to make the policy a success.

Malaysia's success in manufacturing the country's first car, the Proton Saga, was realised with the help of Mitsubishi. Subsequently, young Malaysians were readily accepted into Japanese learning institutions.

It was a relationship that was mutually gratifying which has developed steadily, resulting in Malaysia having "many friends in Japan".

Dr Mahathir said Japan was the only country which offered and gave financial help to Malaysia during the 1997-98 financial crisis.

Dr Mahathir makes frequent visits to Japan, accepting invitations to speak at international conferences. And during these conferences, Japanese economists, businessmen and academicians never fail to tap his brain. And he offers his views liberally.

Always he praised the Japanese work ethics which demonstrate hard work, dedication, discipline, pride and commitment.

But these days, Dr Mahathir is not about to heap too many praises on the Japanese.

In his dialogue with participants after presenting his address, Beyond Globalism and Globalisation at the Nikkei conference on June 8, Dr Mahathir, who is a man known to say what he's got to say, said that not everything Japan was doing now was right. So Malaysia will try to avoid Japan's mistakes that had led to her economic slide.

Perhaps, he hinted, it was because Japan was looking to the West and was

discarding her old values.

Perhaps, Japan was listening too much to the United States.

Nevertheless, the Japanese are good sport. They took it encouragingly and gave Dr Mahathir a big applause.

As they did when he gave his frank views about globalism and globalisation during his inaugural lecture at the UN University and his keynote address at the Nikkei conference.

He made no apologies for his critical views about globalisation because it has not been fair to many developing and poor countries.

Globalisation, he said, is an idea whose time has come but it started on the "wrong foot".

It has caused so much pain to many of these countries because of the double standards applied to open up markets.

Globalisation, he told participants, is one-sided but it does not have to be if only rich nations are not greedy.

Dr Mahathir said he is not against globalisation per se, but felt that it should not be equal to a free and totally deregulated market.

He was not about to let the world forget that rogue currency traders brought about the collapse of some of the strongest markets in Asia which led to the regional financial crisis.

It had to be said, never mind if it was not for the first time. Dr Mahathir admitted, as he has always, that his was not a popular view and wished that he could "say some nice things".

"But I find it very difficult to say anything complimentary because I see injustice done to my country at every turn."

Dr Mahathir, who looked to Japan's spirit to win in this East Asian country's early days of national re-construction as a source of inspiration has now, as a Japanese banker said, inspired many Japanese.

And for the young Malaysians who listened to him speak at the Malaysian Embassy in Tokyo, the Prime Minister "is our man" who has inspired them to "stand tall and walk tall" in a world where nothing really is all that fair.

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