

27 FEB 2001

BFA-MAHATHIR

POOR COUNTRIES TOO CAN IMPOSE CONDITIONS ON INFRASTRUCTURE TAX

By: Yong Soo Heong

BOAO (Hainan), Feb 27 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said that if the rich countries were to impose conditions because they had to pay the proposed infrastructure tax, the poor countries too can counter them by laying down their own conditions.

Dr Mahathir had proposed the infrastructure tax to help poor countries fund their infrastructure development programmes during his keynote address at the inauguration ceremony of the Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) here.

Speaking at a press conference later, he said it was up to the poor countries to design the infrastructure tax and the usage of the funds collected while the rich countries could come up with their ideas as well on how the funds should be expended.

"This is not something that the poor should feel obliged to the rich. This is their entitlement because they are providing the means for the rich to become richer, to make big profits. It stands to reason that the rich, having exploited the poor, should also return to the poor people what is their due," said Dr Mahathir who left for Kuala Lumpur just after midday.

His flight from Haikou, Hainan's capital, to Kuala Lumpur, is expected to take about three and a half hours.

Dr Mahathir said Chinese president Jiang Zemin was the first foreign leader to be informed of his proposal when they met at their bilateral meeting here yesterday.

He said Jiang seemed quite forthcoming and positive about the infrastructure tax proposal.

But the Malaysian premier said Jiang did remark that there might be people who may not be very receptive to the idea.

Dr Mahathir said formulating the mechanism for the infrastructure tax agency was not a big problem.

"Getting the rich to agree to something is of course a big problem," he said and cited the case of the Malaysian-inspired East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) which had always been shot down by the rich countries.

"But it keeps on cropping up every now and then and eventually it (EAEC) would have to be accepted," he said.

Dr Mahathir also said the rich countries would try to shoot down his proposal for the infrastructure tax but "we will persist."

Asked whether his stinging remarks about the Western media and currency speculators had become counter-productive, he replied, "People will always criticise me but that is the way things are. It is for me to push forward an idea and eventually I think good ideas will be accepted, even by those who are not typically fond of me or Malaysia."

"When we did our management of the currency crisis, we were told that we were stupid, that we don't understand about finance or (had) herd instinct but I see even those Western experts are now talking about how we deal with the crisis. I feel that even if they don't like me, maybe they will accept my idea."

Asked on his thoughts on Asian values, Dr Mahathir said they did not differ much from Western values of the Victorian era.

"We are more conservative, we still respect our families, we feel we should not interfere in other people's affairs. We don't talk very frankly, we talk politely but sometimes that is taken for weakness."

Asian values, he said, had helped Asian countries to live in peace with each other much more often than European countries.

"If you look at the history of Europe, every year there is at least two countries fighting with one another for the past 2,000 years. Off and on they will; have the whole of Europe up in flames because there is a need for some bloodletting (among Europeans).

"For the past 50 years there has been no war although recently there was one in Yugoslavia, a small one. They find that they must have an outlet for their values. You see them expressing their values by interfering in the affairs of different countries like Malaysia."

Dr Mahathir said the BFA forum should serve a good channel for poor countries to voice their views and their opposition to some of the ideas coming from the non-Asian countries.

As for its funding, he said he was quite sure that big businesses in Asia would be eager to provide funding because BFA's annual gathering would enable them to meet not only their counterparts from other regions but also the leaders.

Asked on his bilateral meeting with Jiang yesterday, Dr Mahathir said they discussed current issues like globalisation, the new global financial architecture.

"We largely discussed what the two of us can do together," he said.

Asked whether he had rejected a speech written for him at BFA's inauguration ceremony and chose a hard-hitting one instead, Dr Mahathir said, "No, I write my own speeches. Of course I get some ideas from some speechwriters."

Dr Mahathir, when asked what he thought to be the most pressing issue to be discussed by BFA, said poverty eradication should be given top priority.

Earlier in his keynote address, he said there were large numbers of people in Asia who were living from hand to mouth.

Dr Mahathir said, "Many Asian countries are terribly poor. There really is no reason why some people should be obscenely rich while so many live in abject poverty. There is even less reason for people to be poor when the world of today, the world of high technology and high added value is so rich.

"Obviously there is something wrong with the redistribution of wealth across the world. It does not reflect a world which has been reduced to a village. In a village we share everything fairly." -- BERNAMA

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