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Blunt message to kickstart recovery

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IT was with some relief that Malaysians bid adieu to 2001, a year that saw the country going through difficult times against the backdrop of the Sept 11 attack on targets in the United States which shook the world.

Barely a week into the New Year, things seem to be looking up with predictions being made for some form of economic recovery in coming months.

As Malaysians look ahead with optimism, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has reminded all, especially Malays, to seek knowledge which he felt was the key to personal success and national development.

In keeping with the significance of the day, the Berita Harian and Utusan Malaysia ran the Prime Minister's New Year message as their lead story on Jan 1.

Dr Mahathir, exhorting Malaysians to go to any length in this endeavour, warned that those missing out on knowledge would be left behind.

They would also be oppressed and despised by others, said the Prime Minister, a fierce proponent of the belief that knowledge begets power and influence.

The Berita Harian quoted the Prime Minister as saying that Malays who were out of the knowledge curve should not feel hurt or angry if non-Malays were given greater responsibility in the nation-building process.

In a hard-hitting message aimed at kick-starting the process of economic recovery, he said there was a discernible trend of young Malay men not taking an interest in education.

This resulted in the number of male university students falling to half the number of female students, a totally disproportionate ratio given the fact that they were almost equal in numbers nationwide.

Pointing a finger at those who used Islam to oppress fellow Muslims besides perpetuating their influence over the latter, the Berita Harian quoted Dr Mahathir as saying that Muslim societies were always weakened by people of this ilk.

The Utusan Malaysia, in its story, quoted the Prime Minister as saying that only knowledge could help defend the country's freedom and national pride.

The Berita Harian, in an editorial the same day, urged Malaysians to renew their commitment to self and nation. Headlined "Accompany 2002 with a Commitment to Develop", the newspaper called on all to learn from the failures of the past year.

It urged Malaysians not to burden the Government with the entire task of nation-building but to help in the process, especially in ensuring peace.

Stating that various projects would be initiated by the Government this year, the Berita Harian was of the opinion that their success would depend to a great extent on recipients.

The Utusan Malaysia, in its editorial the same day, said the dawn of a new year was the perfect time to think about the future and the past. Headlined "Prosperity in 2002 is in the Hands of the People", it echoed Dr Mahathir's views on the fact that the people were masters of their own destiny.

Underlining the fact that the prosperity of the nation hinged on political and economic stability, the newspaper said the reality of the day was that Malaysians had to defend racial harmony to preserve the former.

Abdullah Ahmad's swan song in Utusan Malaysia

ALL things have to come to an end and so it was with Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad's editorial contributions to Utusan Malaysia and Mingguan Malaysia (the weekend edition of the newspaper).

The last instalment of his regular Sunday feature Isu Minggu Ini saw print on Dec 30 and that of his Wednesday column Komentari Abdullah Ahmad on Jan 2.

For the veteran politician and journalist, it was the end of a long and happy association with the Bahasa Malaysia daily. He now goes on to write for the Berita Minggu.

Popularly known as Dollah Kok Lanas (he was Kok Lanas MP for several terms), he is the group editor-in-chief and executive director of the New Straits Times Press under which the Berita Minggu is published.

In his parting weekend feature, the former Deputy Minister and special envoy to the United Nations revealed his innermost thoughts and emotions as far as writing for the Utusan group was concerned.

This was clearly seen in his confession that he continued writing for the Utusan group because of his passion for the newspaper even after being appointed editorial head of the New Straits Times Press.

The former NST reporter (he wrote for the newspaper during the Independence period in 1957) acknowledges that his involvement with the Utusan Malaysia went back to his schooling days.

Abdullah, a keen observer of current events and people in the news which he records in his columns, continued in his parting note to say that he had done his best as a newsman to keep his covenant with his maker and his conscience.

Abdullah came in for praise the same day from Awang Sulung, the *nom de plume* for the editor of the Utusan Malaysia, who thanked him for the interesting and often racy columns that arrested readers' attention.

Describing his writing as filled with personal experiences, anecdotes and behind-the-scene political happenings, he said Abdullah was always ready to be critical of others and be criticised in turn.

That is Abdullah Ahmad, a colourful politician where ever he is: wherever he is placed, said Awang Sulung.

Not only did Abdullah come in for kudos from the columnist. A reader wrote in from Norwich, the United Kingdom, recording his thanks to the former for penning thoughts in the column entitled Dari Tudor City while in New York as special envoy from 1996 to 2000.

According to the author, Abdullah's columns were a lifeline for someone thousands of kilometres away from home.

Making special mention of the fact that Abdullah was people-friendly in his work, especially when it came to Kelantan (home State to both), the reader paid tribute to the former's writing style which had helped in his study of thesis writing.

In his last contribution to Komentari Abdullah Ahmad, Abdullah thanked Awang Sulung for his testimonial as per the latter's contributions to journalism.

His parting words of advice: do not be hurt if he or any other writer comments on something factual. Conversely, if something printed is untrue, do not melatah (over-react) or lose sleep.

Abdullah's first column in Berita Minggu appears today. Do not miss it. It will give readers an insight into what makes him the person he is: a man for all seasons.

Compulsory POL classes?

THE issue of learning their mother tongue has always been close to the heart of the Chinese and Tamil communities with the numerous Chinese and Tamil schools testimony to such sentiments.

Although only 10 per cent of all Chinese students and 35 per cent of Indian students attend national-type government schools, the teaching of Mandarin and Tamil in these schools has been of no less importance to the communities.

The trend of late of fewer Chinese and Tamils being able to read Mandarin or the Tamil language has not gone unnoticed with the blame lying with the questionable effectiveness of Pupils' Own Language classes.

Of course, parents and the communities at large also have to accept some of the responsibility for deteriorating standards.

The Malaysia Nanban, in its editorial on Dec 31, urged the Education Ministry to study a proposal by People's Progressive Party leader Datuk K. Kayveas to make POL classes compulsory.

The newspaper, noting that this had also been heard from the Chinese and Indian communities for long, said the move would lead to more students mastering their mother tongues.

There may also be a concurrent increase in enrolment of Chinese and Indian students in national-type schools, the Malaysia Nanban opined.
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