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#### New Excellence Policy needed

IT IS a brand new year. The Americans are bombing another country as it pursues its prime suspect, Osama bin Laden, of the September 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington. The Israelis and Palestinians are again at deadly odds, with the West Asia peace process all but thrown out the window. Not to be outdone, India and Pakistan are poised to go to war, possibly a nuclear one. And a South American country - Argentina - is in trouble, facing political and economic collapse as it enters 2002 without a head of government, following the resignation of first its president and then the interim president. The euro has found its way into the pockets of over 300 million Europeans, further fortifying their single market, while half way round the globe 10 countries rolled out their own nascent common market that is the Asean Free Trade Area (Afta). Oil prices are volatile with the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries continuing to grapple with shifting circumstances that are eroding its grip on the market, and other commodities, mainly produced by developing countries, are likewise going through unpredictable times.

It looks like everything is changed and nothing is changed, despite the preceding 12 tumultuous months, a year most people are glad to see the back of, which might account for the unmitigated revelry worldwide at midnight Monday despite the pall that has obviously been cast over the entire globe by events in 2001. In Malaysia, an estimated 100,000 people thronged the Bintang Walk, a popular entertainment centre in downtown Kuala Lumpur, to usher in the new year, while Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in his New Year Message, reminded them and the rest of the country not to take Malaysia's achievements for granted. He told them that the stability and progress they enjoy today had not come about on their own but required great sacrifice; that more importantly the ground won must be jealously defended. The fact that the Prime Minister had found it necessary to issue the reminder shows that certain things in the country can be improved upon - and they always can be - and greater effort is needed from everybody who makes Malaysia his home.

Maybe Dr Mahathir is just a little bit concerned that Malaysians are growing soft, at a time when it is critical for them to strengthen their resolve to stride ahead. "Don't let's take for granted what is available in our country. The success in Malaysia was achieved through policies, planning and efforts that took into account the sensitivities of the various races in the country, the human and natural resources situation, and the limited sources of wealth that we inherited," he said, adding that in today's world, the losers are not only left behind but also cruelly victimised, which means nothing has changed since the Stone Age. There is no way to match the rich and powerful in terms of brute force, but people can still retain their dignity and freedom by being smart, and to constantly pursue knowledge. Malaysia has long been recognised as having a labour force that is easily trained, hard-working and cooperative. There is also no shortage of creative talents in even the most competitive of fields, where some have, for one reason or another, unfortunately been lost to other countries.

But it takes time, and patience and vision, to grow a culture of excellence, which is exactly what the country needs in the 21st Century. Malaysia will be cooperating more than ever with its Asean neighbours to get ahead, but it will also be competing with them on a totally different

scale. And as far as competition for investments and markets are concerned, there is also China - which has just joined the mainstream world trade system - to contend with. All available resources have to be tapped and fully exploited. It is a shame if this effort is set back by certain quarters who will not recognise the new realities, and be prepared to live with their limitations or, worse, force others to share them. Bumiputeras initially benefited significantly in education and skills under the New Economic Policy, or NEP, but negative forces at play have of late caused some young people to forgo opportunities created for them. A new NEP may now be necessary, but one that goes beyond targeting at education and business. It is a New Excellence Policy that Malaysia needs to re-invent itself and make it a truly Happy New Year through years to come.

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