

10 OCT 2002

MAHATHIR-KOREA

M'SIANS CAN SUCCEED LIKE THE KOREANS, SAYS DR MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 10 (Bernama) -- Strong nationalism, discipline and good work ethics will enable Malaysia to succeed as a strong nation just like the Koreans, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

These are the values which helped Korea overcome and recover fast from the effects of the 1997/98 financial crisis, he said during a dialogue session at the conference on "Learning from South Korea - Sustaining growth in a dynamic environment" organised by the National Economic Action Council (NEAC).

Dr Mahathir said: "Their high productivity, discipline and nationalism helped them to recover fast. At the height of the crisis, as you can remember, the people even contributed jewellery and money."

Unlike Malaysia, he said Korea did not peg its exchange rate at that time but took directives from the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

While some countries which subscribed to IMF policies had failed, the Koreans succeeded because they are very patriotic, nationalistic and proud about being Koreans and want to protect their country, he added.

Dr Mahathir said the culture of the people determined whether they would succeed or fail and the Koreans are known to be tremendously disciplined and dedicated to their work.

He recalled his visit to factories there which he said was like military installations where the workers stood up straight and upright to salute him.

In fact, the Koreans had before its industrialisation, come to Malaysia to learn about developing a good economy from the 5-Year Economic Plan.

However, the Koreans had achieved better results because they were very disciplined and hardworking.

In his keynote address, Dr Mahathir said the regional financial crisis had caused the Korean economy to contract by 6.7 percent in 1998, unemployment to peak at 6.8 percent and export to fall by 4.7 percent.

Borrowing US\$58.4 billion from the IMF, the Koreans were determined to rebuild their economy and its GDP rebounded to 10.9 percent in 1999, 8.8 percent in 2000 and 4.5 percent in 2001.

"But what is most admirable is that despite the deep crisis, Korea was able to repay its IMF borrowing of more than US\$50 billion," he added.

Malaysia which took a different route in responding to the crisis, also recovered rapidly.

"Now that Korea and Malaysia have found their direction, we are faced with the challenges of finding new sources of growth and avenues to enhance our competitiveness," he said.

Korea had succeeded in enhancing technological capability through education and skill training and he said, Malaysia was compelled to do the same to remain competitive.

He said the Koreans placed a premium on education, having the highest per capita number of Ph.Ds in the world.

"So we can expect its level of thinking, creativity, productivity and innovation to reflect the knowledge contained within the society," he added.

Todate, 317 government sponsored Malaysian students had graduated from the Korean system either in academic or technical subjects and currently another 131 students are in Korea undergoing training in various technical fields.

Korea is the 11th largest trading nation in the world and the Prime Minister said Malaysia could look at its success in penetrating the international market.

It has created global brands such as LG and Samsung in electrical and electronic goods while Hyundai and Kia are popular cars in the US and Europe. Korea is becoming the world's fifth largest automotive producer from 10th position 10 years ago.

However, Korea's achievements were not only confined to the economic front but also in international sports arena when it successfully hosted the Olympic Games in 1998 and more-recently with co-host Japan the World Cup Football.

Obviously many factors have combined well together for Korea to be what it is now and the challenge for Malaysia is to translate these learning experiences into policies and strategies to make the Korean experience work for us, Dr Mahathir added.

During the dialogue session, the Prime Minister was asked whether the labour force in Japan, which used to contribute to its success, has changed.

To this, he said there was a change in the Japanese work ethics as the labour force now was less disciplined, less hardworking than before, especially among the young ones.

"My belief is that Japan wants to change its whole culture completely and adopt western culture. But it is not easy to change. In the West, you can lay off workers, they collect their dole and live happily without having to work. No shame is attached to that. But the Japanese is different. If they are sacked, they feel ashamed and would not go back to their families," he added.

As to why Malaysia has still to look East at Japan, he said Malaysia needed to avoid the wrong things which Japan did. -- BERNAMA

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