

22/09/2002

Smiles across nation as the people welcome pain-free `bajet`

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THERE were smiles across the nation on Friday when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad unveiled a budget bereft of the usual tax hikes and new taxes.

The pain-free "bajet", a term coined by the Prime Minister, was just what the doctor had prescribed for Malaysians whose wallets have been hit of late by price increases.

The vernacular Press, quick to sense the air of rejoicing, congratulated the Government for sparing the people added financial burdens.

As expected, the Berita Harian and Utusan Malaysia accorded the story front-page play with the former describing the plan for 2003 historical for the absence of new taxes.

In its report yesterday, the newspaper said the budget was geared towards driving domestic growth at a time when economic competition internationally was at a feverish pace.

The Berita Harian congratulated the Government for appreciating the services of civil servants by giving them a month's salary as a bonus or a minimum of RM1,200.

Dr Mahathir was quoted in his Budget speech as saying that the money would be useful to the lower income group especially with Hari Raya Puasa in December and the new school term in January just around the corner.

In his two-hour and 35-minute address telecast live over television, the Prime Minister said the Government was not raising taxes or introducing new ones as its current revenue was sufficient to meet financial needs.

The Utusan Malaysia front-paged a budget story that highlighted the fact that a novel idea to help poor children improve in their studies would be implemented next year.

Tuition vouchers would be issued to them to seek help in their studies from their school teachers.

Poor children, the newspaper added, would also be given RM120 in cash a year to buy school books and uniforms. The Utusan Malaysia also carried a brief story quoting Keadilan president Datin Wan Azizah Ismail as saying that the budget resembled the alternative budget presented earlier by opposition spokesman Prof Jomo Sundram.

She pointed to the bonus for civil servants and the reduction in corporate tax as proof of her observation.

The Berita Harian, in an editorial yesterday, said the 2003 budget was comprehensive, the thrust being development of domestic trade and industry to fuel economic growth.

It said besides economic incentives being announced, the budget was also of special benefit to the unfortunate, the poor and neglected.

Calling the budget a people-friendly one, it said the budget gave more purchasing power to the people without burdening them with more taxes.

"...the budget ensured that the common man would benefit with the projection of greater purchasing power in their hands," it said.

Dr Mahathir, as Finance Minister, did not forget the rural folk who would be benefiting by way of land use, village development and better electricity and water supply.

In a pre-budget report on Thursday, the Berita Harian was spot-on in stating that Dr Mahathir was expected to announce an accentuation of domestic economic growth.

The US decision not to renew visas held by Malaysians studying in the

country also made headlines last week.

Both the Berita Harian and Utusan Malaysia went to town with the issue, carrying the consensus among Malaysians that the move was unfair and detrimental to bilateral relations.

In an editorial on Wednesday, the Berita Harian castigated the US for doing so and ignoring the needs of the 150 students who had been left here without any hint of what the future held for them.

"A large group of male Muslim students in institutions of higher learning have been left in the lurch. What is saddening is that some of them were at the tail end of their studies," the editorial stated.

The editorial stated that if the US was going to be insensitive to Malaysia's needs, then it may be time to look elsewhere to send Malaysian students.

The Utusan Malaysia yesterday also touched on the topic by quoting Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar as saying that US decision on visas had been extended to non-students including businessmen.

He had stated that immigration authorities in the US were scrutinising the passports of Malaysian diplomats and businessmen since the Sept 11 incident last year.

Malaysians will not sleep over a story in the Utusan Malaysia on Thursday which had Deputy Housing and Local Government Minister Datuk M. Kayveas in a spot in the Dewan Rakyat over the use of an indelicate phrase. Describing the relationship between Pas and the DAP as a one-night stand did not go down well with opposition MPs who eventually managed to get the Peoples Progressive Party leader to withdraw the statement.

He was apparently "encouraged" to do so by the presence of school children in the public gallery.