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`Work harder to catch up' (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Bumiputeras have to work harder to catch up quickly with non-Bumiputeras as racial harmony is the key to the country's stability and prosperity, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

Addressing the nation in his last National Day message, Dr Mahathir said that non-Bumiputeras should not get upset if their Bumiputera counterparts succeed because it would benefit all races.

In a speech focusing on the weaknesses of the Malays, Dr Mahathir apologised for bringing up the issue but said the matter was important for the country's well-being.

"This is the last time I can speak in conjunction with a day that is so important to us all: Merdeka Day, our National Day.

"This is why I ask to speak longer than usual. There are many messages that I want to get across, and which I feel are important to us all," he said in the address aired over all television channels tonight.

Dr Mahathir is scheduled to retire in October, after 22 years as the country's longest-serving Prime Minister. He has named Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as his successor.

Lamenting the failure of Bumiputeras to keep up, Dr Mahathir said they now only controlled 19 per cent of the country's economy although the New Economic Policy had set a target of 30 per cent.

He attributed this to the Malays' greed, those who sold the equity given to them by the Government to non-Bumiputeras for quick gains.

He urged the Malays to, first of all, acknowledge their weaknesses and find ways to overcome them. This was possible if they worked hard and did not look for short cuts.

Citing the example of Datuk Abdul Malik Mydin who braved freezing waters and high waves to become the first Malaysian to swim across the English Channel recently, Dr Mahathir said the marathon swimmer succeeded because he had undergone rigorous training and was also mentally prepared.

"When Azhar, who sailed solo around the world, returned to the country, there were people who asked how he did it... I am disappointed that even some young Malays had wanted to know what kind of ilmu (supernatural power) Azhar had used to complete the feat," said Dr Mahathir, in reference to sailor Datuk Azhar Mansor.

These people thought that Azhar knew black magic, and wanted to apply the same "power" as a short-cut to personal success, he said.

To succeed, he said one must be knowledgeable, work hard, stay disciplined and be patient. Prayers alone would not help if one did not put in enough effort, he said.

During the recent United States-led war in Iraq, he said many Muslims also prayed for Iraq to triumph but the country was invaded anyway.

He attributed the downfall of the Iraqi regime to the oppression committed by President Saddam Hussein against its own people so much so the Iraqis were not willing to sacrifice their lives to defend the regime.

"Saddam was defeated by himself because he did not adhere to the true teachings of Islam. Our prayers were not enough to undo the neglect of Islam caused by the Iraqi leader," Dr Mahathir, who had opposed the war, said.

He also expressed disappointment over people who thought that if they came into power they, too, could run the country successfully and did not

need to be grateful to anyone.

"In a society that is not grateful, everyone will be selfish. There will not be friendship and even family ties will not exist. Everyone will be greedy and there will not be a civilised society. This will give rise to the Stone Age where might is right."

He said this would be an un-Islamic society although those who spread ingratitude among the people, did it in the name of Islam.

Malaysia, he said, was no longer a small country. It has a population of 25 million and a per capita income of RM14,000, compared with a population of five million and a per capita income of RM800 before independence 46 years ago.

Since 1957, the country had built infrastructure which was on par with those from the developed nations while the wage difference between the highest- and the lowest-paid civil servants had narrowed from 78 times to 29 times, Dr Mahathir, who is also Finance Minister, said.

The average salary of Malaysians has also gone up by 6.5 per cent while inflation by 3.3 per cent during the same period, leading to increased purchasing power.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia was already regarded as a "semi-developed nation", and the people should not expect to pay Third World prices for First World facilities.

Since independence, the country had progressed using a blend of local approaches and methods used by other nations, he added.

From racial problems to security and the economy, Dr Mahathir said even the international community had acknowledged that the Malaysian approach in dealing with such problems was just as good, if not better, than the orthodox methods.

"Now, we find that our former colonial masters do not want us to be free. Our territory is still being targeted by them, whether directly or otherwise. One subtle way is through conquering our minds," he said, adding that Malaysians should be vigilant of these attempts by the foreign powers.

He said Malaysians were no less intelligent than those from other countries, as locals not only had climbed Mount Everest, walked to the North Pole, sailed solo around the globe but the country had also offered the world quality and sophisticated products besides building skyscrapers and modern roads.

God willing, Dr Mahathir said the country would become a developed nation by 2020.

"This country is our responsibility. It is not that we are arrogant and think that we are so intelligent that we do not need the help of others. We are prepared to learn from the West and the East. But in the end, we are the ones who decide which is the best way."