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Budget pleasant parting present to the people

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THE 2004 Budget unveiled by Prime Minister and Finance Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad - his last before he retires in October - was a pleasant parting gift to various groups of Malaysians.

As expected, he handed goodies to the lower income groups, single parents, the disabled, small and medium-scale industry operators, etc.

Like previous budgets, priority has been given to education, health, rural development and skills enhancement.

Emphasis is also laid on the social agenda and the need to pursue the caring society programme, both of which are fundamental to our efforts to become a developed nation by 2020.

What is noteworthy is the decisive steps to cut the overall deficit to 3.3 per cent next year as a proportion of the gross domestic product from 5.4 per cent this year. The Budget aims to strengthen competitiveness, and emphasises the need for resilience and self-reliance.

The message to the private sector is to take advantage of the business-friendly environment and additional tax incentives to reinvest and contribute more to economic growth.

Among the various strategies stated in the Budget is one concerning the strengthening of the social agenda. The social ills plaguing our nation and the degradation of moral values are far too serious to be ignored.

If not resolved, they can seriously jeopardise our efforts to realise our national vision. The recent launch of the National Social Policy to promote social development is a step in the right direction.

What needs to be done is to ensure the implementation of the National Social Policy and give meaning to it with the support of non-governmental organisations, community leaders and all sections of the community.

While the Budget has mentioned the setting up of 50 community service centres in areas with high incidence of crimes and social problems, it is still inadequate.

We need to introduce a large-scale promotion of values with the involvement of NGOs and community-based organisations. In this regard, the Government should provide a special fund of RM2 million.

The Budget also proposes to increase and strengthen security and enforcement in view of the recent spate of crimes, which has made people feel insecure.

Stepping up security surveillance by increasing the capacity and effectiveness of law enforcement agencies like the police is essential, if we are to provide a safe environment.

Police personnel, particularly the lowerranking officers, should not only be better equipped to deal with criminals but also be paid better salaries, allowances, etc.

To assist parents in reducing the burden of bringing up and educating children, the Government has proposed an increase in tax relief from RM800 to RM1,000 per child.

While welcoming the spirit of helping Malaysian families to cope with the rising costs of bringing up and educating children, I feel the tax relief per child should be raised to RM1,500, as the RM200 increase is negligible.

The Government could do more by increasing the present RM8,000 personal tax relief to RM10,000.