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Enjoying fruits of Dr M's 22-year leadership

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"SAUBER Petronas!" Zeugg, a Swiss Army Reserve officer exclaimed when he met Malaysian journalists covering the recent Group of Eight meeting in Evian, France. Zeugg, a 27-year-old officer had been called up for service and was patrolling the streets of Evian together with French personnel during the meeting.

Later, a French teenager wanted to know where the Malaysian leader, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was. When told that he was in his hotel in Lausanne the teenager then enquired whether Dr Mahathir would be coming over to Evian?

When told that Dr Mahathir had just returned to the hotel across Lake Geneva, the youth together with his friends were disappointed. They said they had wanted to meet Dr Mahathir.

They knew where Malaysia was and Zeugg, a racing fan, obviously knew of Petronas' and Malaysia's participation in the Formula 1. The teenagers, on the other hand, knew about the Prime Minister and the country.

These two encounters demonstrate that today Malaysia and its leaders are known worldwide. People, even teenagers, know about our leaders. And the knowledge is not just cursory but quite substantial.

How things have changed. It was not too long ago that Malaysians travelling abroad had to explain where Malaysia was. In explaining Malaysia's location to Americans, Vietnam used to be an easy starting point, only because of the Vietnam War.

As for Malaysia - they did not have an idea. Even the White House journalists had a tough time figuring it out when Dr Mahathir paid an official visit in 1984 some White House reporters were over-heard trying to explain to their fellow journalists that Malaysia was close to Siam.

Today, there is no need to look for the world map or think of countries nearby to explain where Malaysia is located. Dr Mahathir, who marks 22 years in office this month, has put the country firmly on the world map. He has made Malaysians stand tall.

Malaysia's views are sought at international conferences, its policies studied and deemed good enough for other countries to emulate, adapt and adopt. Many in developing countries look to Dr Mahathir to speak up for them and to articulate their views and concerns.

Foreign leaders and dignitaries make Kuala Lumpur a stop on their official visits. Next week, Kuala Lumpur will play host to Russian President Vladimir Putin, the first visit to Malaysia by a Russian President. This visit follows closely on the heels of German Chancellor Gerhard Schroder and the French President is expected soon.

In the first six months of the year, Malaysia has played host to several leaders and held the 116-member Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) conference. The red carpet is rolled out almost every month.

The interest in Malaysia, its policies and leadership has been due to the economic development and political stability of the country.

Malaysia's success is testimony to its abilities; leaders, including those in the developed world, now take notice and pay attention to us.

Many may not agree with Dr Mahathir but they, at the same time, envy him for his ability to speak up. Many share the sentiment but are unable to voice support because of the state of their domestic economies and dependence on foreign aid and handouts.

"Dr Mahathir has emerged as an utterly indispensable leader in steering

the country's course through the threshold of the 21st century," Aziz Zariza Ahmad writes in his book Mahathir's Paradigm Shift - The Man Behind the Vision.

Under his leadership, Malaysia has emerged as one of the most prosperous emerging countries. Per capita income of US\$4,000 (RM15,200) today is an increase of 233 per cent from US\$1,717 in 1980 and a massive 1,504 per cent rise from 1957 when it was just US\$266.

In purchasing power parity the per capita income is US\$8,796 an increase of 197 per cent from US\$4,487 in 1980. This means that Malaysians actually enjoy a much better standard of living than the per capita income of US\$4,000.

And poverty has been reduced from 70 per cent to seven per cent. Not many countries can lay claim to similar reductions in poverty.

As Dr Mahathir told the Umno delegates at its recent general assembly, "Wages in Malaysia may be low compared to those in the developed countries but they have not caused our standard of living to fall.

"In many instances, the public facilities are the same as in developed countries, but the cost to the people using these facilities is less than those in developed countries. We pay only RM7 to cross Penang Bridge. The Japanese pay RM500 to use a shorter bridge".

Even as the standard of living has improved and many of the facilities available are of the First World, in many ways the mentality and attitude of Malaysians remain stuck in the Third World.

This must be dealt with. This is the responsibility of each and every individual. Malaysians cannot continue to demand that the Government provide first-class facilities and services if we continue to abuse and destroy the facilities. The mentality needs to change to keep pace with the facilities available to us.

Malaysia emerged from the recent financial crisis quite well and is being held up as an example for other countries. But the challenges remain and with the uncertain world economic and political environment, the rising violence and terrorism call for even more vigilance.

So far Malaysia has been agile and adjusted rapidly to global changes. And Kuala Lumpur, under Dr Mahathir, has not followed conventional and textbook theories and policies. He is known to be unorthodox, not afraid to speak up and to call a spade a spade.

He is a forceful speaker and as the former Commonwealth Secretary-General Sir Shridath Ramphal pointed out the "forcefulness with which Dr Mahathir voiced his views and opinion in international forums against apartheid sent tremors throughout the world".

He continues to be just as forceful today and continues to send tremors with regard to issues about which he is passionate and in areas where he sees injustice.

Many may not like what they hear. But they continue to point to Malaysia's economic success and stability. It has emerged from a commodity-producing Third-World country to a manufacturing nation with First-World facilities.

Malaysia's foreign policy, just like its domestic policy, is as Aziz points out "based on a sense of commitment to independent, clearly defined goals".

In his 22 years, Dr Mahathir has not wavered and remains "consistent in his convictions and steadfastness in the face of various challenges". He has been serious about bringing about a paradigm shift and in many ways he has.

But the country's development is still "work in progress" and for this even higher standards are being set for Malaysians at home and abroad with Malaysia having an impact with foreigners abroad including French

teenagers and racing enthusiasts.