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Let's form true partnerships (HL)

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PETALING JAYA, Mon. - Overseas Chinese should be more visible in the nation-building process of their host country and form true partnerships with the locals, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said this would help correct the long-held stereotypical view of overseas Chinese as being more focused on increasing their wealth than contributing to the socio-economic development of the host country.

He noted that this perception was based, perhaps, on the behaviour of earlier waves of emigrants.

"Whenever possible, they should have true partnership with the locals.

"And the locals for their part must make serious attempts to learn and acquire the business and entrepreneurial skills of the Chinese," he said at the Seventh World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention today.

More than 3,200 delegates from more than 20 nations, representing nearly 100 major organisations, are attending the convention organised by the Associated Chinese Chambers of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was one of those countries where the Chinese have done very well and in the process, they have also done well for the country.

He added that while the Malays provided a good, if not perfect administration, the Chinese provided the entrepreneurship and business skills to enrich the country.

"The relationship is symbiotic - both gaining from each other's specialised role. Some would say it is cronyism between the ruling indigenous elites and the Chinese tycoons.

"Cronyism is a universal phenomenon found in every country, developed and developing. The difference is only one of degree," he said.

In Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said, the number of Chinese who succeeded without knowing government leaders or officers was uncountable.

Inevitably, the prominent among them were recognised and known by the Government, especially when they were generous in charitable work.

"It is impossible for the rich and the generous to remain in obscurity."

He added that Chinese Malaysians had developed a culture that was a unique blend of local culture and their own culture.

"The Babas and Nyonyas of Malacca, Singapore and Penang form a distinct community, still Chinese but obviously not the same as their China-born ancestors.

"In Malaysia, we do not expect or try to assimilate the Chinese or Indians into the indigenous community. Our approach is one of integration. In this, we have been quite successful," he said.

The Prime Minister said a common thread that linked Malaysia, Thailand, Singapore, Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia with China was the presence of the overseas Chinese.

"Although they largely resist assimilation, they nevertheless identify themselves with the countries they live in," he said.

Their presence, he added, had never been used as an excuse by China to invade and to colonise, as happened with other countries.

Instead of adapting to local conditions, Dr Mahathir said the Chinese have contributed to the development and growth of these countries. Wherever they are, they have contributed to the wealth creation of those countries.

"This they do because of their entrepreneurship, their willingness to

take risks and their quick appreciation of the needs of the places that they migrate to," he added.

He said they literally saw what the locals failed to see, the opportunities which abounded.

According to the Overseas Chinese Confederation, in May 2000, there were 34 million Chinese residing in 140 countries. A 2002 Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy study puts the figure at about 60 million.

With an estimated wealth of more than US\$1.4 trillion, Dr Mahathir said, overseas Chinese constituted what could be called the third largest economy in the world after the GNPs of the United States and Japan.

Asia has the largest overseas Chinese population (28 million) followed by Americas (3.5 million), Europe (1.6 million), Oceania (571,000) and Africa (137,000).

Dr Mahathir said: "Far from trying for domination in ideology or in structuring the systems of the world, the overseas Chinese have tried to maintain a low profile."

Not being protected by China as a superpower, he said, the overseas Chinese had always been sensitive to the question of their political and economic loyalty to the countries where they had settled.

He said overseas Chinese must work closely with the indigenous people and help reduce the economic disparities between them and the locals.

"It would certainly contribute not only to the fair sharing of the wealth released by Chinese entrepreneurship but help prevent the kind of incidents that seem to be common in many countries of Southeast Asia for example, whenever bad times come," he added.

He said the Chinese were well-known for their charity work and this could contribute towards greater social justice in their countries of adoption.