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Malay builders must buck up

THE problem with some Bumiputera contractors is that they are more enterprising than entrepreneurial. They are good at winning contracts but poor in delivering them. They are quick in pointing fingers at others when they run into problems but slow in acknowledging their own shortcomings.

As part of the efforts to restructure the economy to achieve economic parity with the other races, the Government's initiatives to encourage Bumiputera participation in the construction industry since the days of the New Economic Policy have ranged from favourable allocation of contracts to the establishment of various institutions to provide training and loans. However, as the Prime Minister pointed out in his speech at the annual general meeting of the Malay Contractors Association of Malaysia, although the number of Malay contractors has increased tremendously over the last 30 years, the number of successful ones is still small.

Starting almost from scratch, the large number of failed Malay enterprises in the construction industry in the early years of the NEP could be considered an unavoidable cost that had to be paid because of the steep learning curve they had to climb. However, as Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has indicated, the continuing under-performance of Malay contractors is a price that the Government may no longer be prepared to pay. "I am sorry if we can no longer give contracts to people who cannot do the job," said Dr Mahathir, in expressing his dismay at the problems associated with jobs given to Malay builders.

Dr Mahathir has also challenged Malay contractors to prove their worth by winning contracts in the private sector and by venturing overseas.

They should not expect more handouts or quick fixes to their problems. To undo the unsavoury reputation that they have gained as inept business enterprises, they should begin with an introspective inquiry into their own weaknesses and study the strengths of their successful rivals. They should then proceed to acquire the necessary entrepreneurial skills, managerial capabilities, technical expertise, and business practices. The onus is on the fraternity of Bumiputera contractors to reinvent themselves in order to survive and compete on equal terms with the best in the business. They must not stop learning.