

18/09/2003

`Keen to invest more in ports'

M.K. Megan

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Malaysia is prepared to invest more money in its ports because it is an important industry that can enhance the economy, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said tonight.

The Prime Minister said Malaysian identity in the industry has grown by leaps and bounds since it started off as a trading nation more than a thousand years ago.

Dr Mahathir said under British rule, Malaysian ports such as Port Swettenham were not developed as the British thought Singapore port was good enough.

"They thought it was cheaper to transport the goods by rail to Singapore to be exported. But we had our own ambitions. We started building many ports and from handling less than two millions containers 10 years ago, we are now handling about 10 million containers today and still growing."

Dr Mahathir was speaking at the International Maritime Night organised in conjunction with the two-day International Council of Containership Operators meeting here.

He said the situation reminded him of an article by Time magazine long ago that the container industry elsewhere had no future when huge cranes were built in Rotterdam, Holland. "But they were wrong. In fact the magazine knows nothing about the business but behaved like it knows everything.

"Like how they try to teach us to govern and develop this country. They give us free advice but if we go the opposite direction we will succeed," he said to applause from the audience.

"We like to do it our way," he said adding that not long ago he took objection to the song I did it my way (originally sung by Frank Sinatra) being dedicated to him because it starts off with "The end is near".

"But now I do not take objection anymore because the end is really near for me ... until the end of October. But I hope the end of Malaysian growth is not near," he said.

Earlier the Petronas orchestra performing at the dinner dedicated the song to the Prime Minister.

Dr Mahathir said he hoped international industry players would choose Malaysia to do business.

"We will give every support because we believe it is an important industry."

He said Malaysia was now the 18th biggest trading nation in the world with an annual total trade of about US\$180 billion (RM684 billion).

On the ICCO meeting being held here for the first time, Dr Mahathir said it was very significant as it marked a recognition of Malaysia as one of their principal areas of trade.

The meeting was jointly organised by the Ministry of Transport and Malaysia International Shipping Corporation Bhd.

Also at the dinner were Transport Minister Datuk Chan Kong Choy, his deputy Tan Sri Ramli Ngah Talib and ICCO chairman Ray Miles.

In his speech, Miles praised Dr Mahathir for having transformed Malaysia into a nation growing fast economically.

"Under his leadership there has been huge social growth and heavy investment in education," he added.