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PM: Corruption is poison (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Malaysians face the risk of losing the nation to the most persuasive corrupters if they fail to resist the temptations of corruption, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said tonight.

Dr Mahathir said it was incumbent upon Malaysians to know the dangers of corruption and bribery and to avoid them like poison.

"Unfortunately, there are many Malays and other Malaysians who see corruption as an easy way to get rich," he said at the Transparency International Malaysia National Integrity Medal awards ceremony.

"If they are not careful, they might lose the nation to the most persuasive corrupters."

Awards were conferred posthumously on Tun Dr Ismail Abdul Rahman, Tun Tan Siew Sin and Tun Ismail Mohamed Ali for decisively confronting corruption in the course of their duties.

Dr Mahathir said it must be instilled in the minds of Malaysians at an early age that they should reject corruption.

Young Malaysians, he added, should learn from history and be constantly reminded of how they lost their independence and nearly lost their country when the MacMichael treaties were signed.

"Next time, the exit may not be easy."

The treaty had proposed that Malay rulers give their consent to the formation of the Malayan Union but this was met with strong opposition from the Malays, who later formed Umno.

Dr Mahathir said that corruption could be fought through good values and discipline, and not merely through laws and punishment.

"Equip the people with this culture and three-quarters of the battle would be won."

Dr Mahathir said during the colonial period, many Malay States were unable to progress because of corruption.

Taxes collected during that time, he said, never reached the royal treasury but instead went into the pockets of the officials.

When the British decided to collect the taxes themselves, Malay rulers were bribed to hand over their state administration, "a virtual colonisation despite the charade of the so-called protectorate status of the Malay States".

"This is a very interesting case history of how the Malay States were colonised through bribery. Clearly a country can be completely lost through bribery and corruption."

Dr Mahathir said that while gratification was attractive, in the long run the corrupt would have to pay a hefty price.

"A country where corruption is a way of life will never be able to develop, no matter how rich it may be."

He said it was fortunate Malaysia had not reached a critical stage in corruption.

"It is still possible to arrest and prosecute corrupt officers and their corrupters. Indeed every year we see quite a few being prosecuted and many had departmental action taken against them."

He stressed that corruption would continue to remain if it was practised and turned into a culture.

Dr Mahathir said the belief that the "big fish" must be caught while the "minnows" were considered unimportant was wrong as the culture of corruption began with the minnows. "Besides, when corruption is tolerated

among the minnows, the big fish are encouraged and society accepts the practice, and it becomes a culture."

He added that society should not get distracted and be consumed by material rewards at the risk of abandoning personal values.

"I have absolutely no doubt at all that our future as a viable, modern and balanced nation will depend not only on how quickly we learn to master cutting-edge technological innovations but also, and perhaps even more important, how prepared we are as individuals and as a community to recognise the importance of, what Transparency International calls, a national integrity system."