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Package is to spur economy (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - The RM7.3 billion economic stimulus package unveiled recently is not designed to make the Government popular but to spur the domestic economy, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said the package was prudent and formulated carefully to reinforce the economy, raise consumption and help those affected by the severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak.

Dr Mahathir, who is also Finance Minister, said the Government has sufficient resources for the package.

"Although the package is worth RM7.3 billion, the Government came up with RM1.7 billion. For the rest, we used money from the market. The Government has taken steps to ensure that expenditure is based on its means.

"We do not spend unnecessarily. If we spend irresponsibly, we will incur high deficits and debts and the country will go bankrupt," he said at a Workers' Day gathering at the National Public Administration Institute at Bukit Kiara.

Present were Cuepacs president Datuk N. Siva Subramaniam, Human Resources Minister Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn and Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Samsudin Osman.

He urged Malaysians to spend within their means and to forego what they could not afford as it was the only way "we can be safe and not have to rely on anybody".

He said the people often complained that their pay was low, and would continue to do so even after it was increased.

"They never seem to have enough. When I started working as a temporary clerk, my monthly pay was only RM80. I later became a doctor and my pay increased but it was still not enough ... it is never enough. But I believe that if you spend within your means, it will surely be sufficient."

In his hour-long speech, peppered with light-hearted moments and personal anecdotes, Dr Mahathir pointed out that people always queried why their pay was low, but they failed to ask whether they could, for instance, afford their car.

"People should not think they ought to own something just because others have it. If you do not manage your expenses well, you will always feel that you don't have enough and you will suffer. But if you manage it well, you will be fine ... and not have to resort to borrowing from loan sharks."

Dr Mahathir reminded civil servants that the lowest salary just after Independence was RM25 but it had now increased to RM400.

"If we can afford it, we will give. But if we cannot, we won't, or else it will lead us to bankruptcy.

"As for Employees' Provident Fund dividends, it is not that we do not want to give higher dividends, but our investments did not yield profits. We do not have the money, but they still insist."

In this regard, Dr Mahathir said he was grateful to Cuepacs for it was willing to compromise.

Dr Mahathir said Western countries often took a confrontational stance to resolve disputes.

"Might is right. That is their way. America went ahead and attacked Iraq

despite worldwide condemnation."

Dr Mahathir said when one group became too strong, it would lose all sense of rationality and would not think of the effects of its demands.

"If workers' unions feel they are strong, they will make demands without thinking of the consequences to their employers, the business and the country. In the end, it is they themselves who will suffer."

On a statement by US ambassador to Malaysia Marie Huhtala that ties between the US and Southeast Asian countries would go downhill unless leaders "curb their sometimes offensive criticism of Washington's foreign policy", Dr Mahathir said he would continue to express his opinion as it was the truth.

"We will speak the truth. We have to say what we believe is true."

He said the US always championed the freedom of expression, therefore it should know that sometimes "you will hear things you like and sometimes you will hear things you don't like".

"The same thing applies to us. We have been criticised by others, and we have accepted it."

Dr Mahathir, however, was confident that Malaysia's stand would not bring about negative effects.

"Our trade with America is affected because of the world economy. If not, our relationship with American businessmen is very good. We are only criticising their Government's attitude."

On concern among Third World countries that Malaysia's stance would not be "as strong" when Dr Mahathir steps down in October, the Prime Minister said they should not misjudge Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Saying Abdullah had the same views as him, he added: "They should be reminded that my stand is also that of the Government's and the Cabinet's."

In his speech, Dr Mahathir urged Malaysians to master the English language. He said while steps had been taken to teach Science and Mathematics in English in schools, adults must also improve their command of English.

"Don't be pseudo-patriots and refuse to learn because the reality is that we need to be conversant in English. We will not be sacrificing anything but we will be getting something more."

Stressing that mastering English would not be at the expense of Bahasa Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said: "I am a nationalist and I am one even though I am saying this in English."

"We need to acquire skills and we cannot do so with just Bahasa Malaysia. While we should preserve the national language, we need English to progress."

He said the Chief Secretary to the Government would be asking all government departments to organise English courses.

Dr Mahathir also fielded questions at a dialogue where he was asked questions ranging from privatisation to income tax. The Prime Minister was also asked to give advice to the younger generation of civil servants.

The most important is loyalty and discipline.

"When I became Prime Minister, I did not know everything immediately. I had to discipline myself. I told myself 'no more personal interests, only national interests' and pushed aside all that had nothing to do with my job."

"To become a Prime Minister, one must be willing to learn. In some countries, they change their Prime Minister every two years. The longer it is, the wiser you will become if you seek knowledge."