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People should learn how to use modern facilities, says PM

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JOHOR BARU, Thurs. - Malaysians should know how to use modern facilities and conveniences and become high-class consumers to boost the image of the country among visitors.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said unless the people changed their way of life, they would continue to be third-class consumers despite having first-class facilities.

He said Malaysians should realise that it was now a different time and age, compared to the post-Independence period, and they should alter their lifestyles accordingly.

"We in Malaysia are recognised as cultured people.

"We must, therefore, remind ourselves that our way of life has changed from the time of Merdeka.

"Our habits and ways of doing things must change to reflect our status as a developed and modern nation," he said at the ground-breaking ceremony for the RM200 million Festive Street Mall, one of the key components of the Danga Bay Development project.

The Johor privatisation project is being developed by Danga Bay Sdn Bhd (DBSB) and jointly managed by Ekovest Bhd and Pembinaan Limbongan Setia (PLS) Bhd.

Danga Bay, which dots the Lido Beach waterfront here, is to be developed in phases over 15 years at an estimated cost of RM15 billion.

Also present were Johor Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman, DBSB director Kamarul Ariffin Sulaiman and Limbongan-Ekovest Management Sdn Bhd director Datuk Lim Kang Hoo.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysians had a penchant for coming up with creative ideas to develop their surroundings, resulting in the building of several large-scale development projects around the country.

Consequently, he noted, Malaysia had buildings and facilities that were comparable to some of the best in the world, although their care and upkeep was slack.

"It makes no sense to build world-class facilities when the mentality of our people is still third-class," he said, adding that there was a dire need for a change of mindset.

Referring specifically to the Danga Bay project, Dr Mahathir said it was a "dream come true" for Johor Baru residents because of the host of social, recreational and public facilities provided.

He said such mega projects would help rid the "glaring" difference in landscape as visitors travel to Johor Baru from across the Causeway.

"We do not want visitors from the other side to see this glaring difference. Instead, we want them to be filled with awe at the standard and quality of the facilities we provide," he said.

Earlier, after the opening of the Johor Customs Tower and launching of the construction of the Gerbang Perdana bridge here, the Prime Minister said Malaysia did not harbour any economic interest in replacing its side of the Causeway with a new elevated bridge.

He said the bridge was being built for environmental reasons.

"The bridge will ensure the free flow of water in the Tebrau Straits ever since the Causeway was built 80 years ago.

"We want leisure boats to sail freely in the straits. Now they have to sail around (Singapore) to get to the other side.

"There is no economic agenda in the project," he said.

He was responding to a question by a journalist from Singapore who had asked if the "crooked" design of the bridge reflected the mood of relations between Malaysia and Singapore.

"Anybody can interpret it as they like, the truth is we want to build a straight bridge but they (Singapore) do not want it.

"They only want to build the bridge in 2007 or something like that.

"It is not our fault, we did ask them to join us, and we want to make modifications (to the bridge)," Dr Mahathir said.

The construction of the 1.4 kilometre bridge is part of the the Gerbang Selatan Bersepadu project, which will also include the building of the new Johor Baru Customs, Immigration and Quarantine Complex.

At the function, Dr Mahathir was presented with a slab of granite which was part of the Causeway foundation stone, to commemorate the launch of construction works via a video link-up at the Johor Customs Tower.

The slab of granite was picked up by Gerbang Selatan Bersepadu scuba diver Govind Ramasamy at the bottom of the Causeway structure two hours prior to the event.

Dr Mahathir was told by the project's Public Works Department general manager Anthon Sebastian, via the video link-up, that the RM1 billion bridge, which will also include a swing rail bridge, will be completed in December 2005.

Motorists may start using it in January, 2006.

Sebastian also told the Prime Minister that the RM2.26 billion Customs, Immigration and Quarantine (CIQ) complex would be completed two months before the bridge is completed.

Dr Mahathir, who posed several questions about the project to Sebastian, even cracked a joke, asking whether work on the project could possibly be completed before his scheduled retirement in October.

"I want to open the bridge myself. Can you all complete it by October?" he asked, much to the amusement of the over 3,000 crowd attending the function.

Earlier, Dr Mahathir reminded Customs officers to uphold the integrity of the department and maintain a high level of professionalism and competency in their work.

He said Customs officers should not think of enriching themselves, but help make the nation rich through effective customs enforcement at all checkpoints.

The 13-storey Johor Customs Tower, which houses the State Customs department headquarters, was built at a cost of RM34 million and completed in November 2001.

Later, Dr Mahathir said the Government would formulate a strategy to stop the smuggling of rice into the country as it had the potential to seriously undermine the country's economy.

He said the smugglers, who previously brought in rice in small quantities, were now smuggling them into the country by the shiploads, resulting in loss of demand for local rice.

"This means local padi farmers will suffer," he said.

Responding to a question about the suicide bombing in Jerusalem on Tuesday, Dr Mahathir said he was saddened by the loss of innocent lives, especially children.

He said the bombing, which killed 20 bus passengers and wounded 120 others, would not help the Palestinian cause as it would only serve to alienate them further from efforts to find a peaceful solution to the Middle East crisis.

"I am very sorry about that. I do not think it will help in anyway," he said.

"They bomb us and then we bomb them, followed by them bombing us again

and we bomb them back, when will it end?" he said in a frustrated tone.

"They are now bombing anyone without any care as to who will get hurt. We are even killing little children. I do not know now whether this is an Islamic struggle anymore," he added.

Asked if he thought there was any prospect of achieving the "road map" to a peace plan initiated by the United States, Dr Mahathir said the killings must be stopped in order for the world to listen to the Palestinians' plight.

"We are not in the first place really satisfied with the peace road map, but it is still a start.

"If we continue with it, it may lead to something but if we kill people, who will want to talk to us.

"Even if they (the Israelis) are evil and are killing us... if we also kill them, and they kill us back, and we kill them again, and they kill us in return, there will be no end to it," Dr Mahathir said.

Asked about claims by the Indonesian authorities that two Malaysians were behind the bombing of the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta on Aug 5, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would leave it to Jakarta to take action against them.

Indonesian police had named former University Teknologi Malaysia lecturer Dr Azahari Husin and another Malaysian, Noor Din Mohd Top, as the masterminds behind the attack which killed 12 people.

On another matter, Dr Mahathir said Pas' ploy of using separate manifestos for its coming election campaign was just a ruse to trick voters as well as their Opposition allies.

"That is what we call a forked tongue... one aimed at the States and the other at the Federal Government," he said.

On Pas' strategy of dropping its Islamic State aspirations at the national level while retaining it at the State level, he said:

"They want to trick the DAP. They want to even trick their own friends. Is this what they claim to be an Islamic party?" he added.