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Prime Minister delights Chinese businessmen with witty, frank answers

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MUCH to the delight of the more than 3,200 participants from more than 20 nations, representing nearly 100 major organisations, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad took all their questions fielded at him yesterday at the Seventh World Chinese Entrepreneurs Convention at Sunway Pyramid Convention Centre in Petaling Jaya.

Many were disappointed that the dialogue session had to come to an end after almost an hour, with the Prime Minister having another engagement in Putrajaya.

The questions were varied. There was even an instance when a delegate from China took to the floor to ask Dr Mahathir, being a medical doctor, to talk about healthcare for the Chinese and healthcare products, which left the participants in stitches.

Below are excerpts of the question and answer session:

Q: I wish to seek your opinion with regard to globalisation. What do you think the role of Chinese entrepreneurs should be in enhancing world economic harmonisation?

Dr M: Chinese entrepreneurs can play a big role. In fact, they are already playing a big role. As I said in my speech just now, Chinese entrepreneurs have contributed much to the wealth of many countries including developing countries. In the first place, they have not been too greedy by taking everything for themselves. They have always been prepared to share with the local people and this is a good example for a globalised world.

What we see will benefit not only the rich country, namely the country with big corporations which seem to dominate the whole world. Some of us are good in creating wealth or exploiting wealth but others are not able to even exploit the wealth in their own countries. But the Chinese entrepreneurs have exploited the wealth and are willing to share with the locals and have not tried to dominate the world through their ability to create and exploit wealth.

That is something that the Chinese entrepreneurs can contribute by ensuring that the very rich countries with giant corporations do not dominate but work together and share wealth with poor countries.

The present trend in globalisation is such that the rich countries get more opportunities to get richer at the expense of poorer countries. So I hope that the Chinese entrepreneurs will use their worldwide method to contribute towards wealth creation, which they will share with the local people.

That is the role, I think, Chinese entrepreneurs can play as a good example.

Q: This is a follow-up question. You would like the Chinese entrepreneurs to share wealth. Is there any approach for Chinese entrepreneurs to overcome restrictions so they can share their wealth with the local people?

Dr M: In Malaysia, we have no problems for the Chinese to participate in politics, in the Government they represent the views of the Chinese population whose views are very moderate. As such, I am quite sure that they will have the same attitude and stand in other countries as well. So they will protect their rights and at the same time, remain sensitive to the rights of others.

Q: (translation from Chinese) The organisation, which the gentleman

represents has a membership of 30,000 and they are here to express their highest appreciation to you for the leadership and achievement you have brought about in the country's political, economic and social development. And he has a popular and earnest request whether you will continue to be in office and provide leadership to the country. In addition, he also has a project with the theme of promoting world peace in mind. He is also forwarding a proposal for the Malaysian Government to consider some form of participation.

Dr M: Well, we would certainly like to examine the working papers in detail first. Nevertheless, we are interested in promoting peace and in a few days' time, I will be speaking at the world peace conference. We have awarded President (Jacques) Chirac with the Kuala Lumpur Peace Award. That shows the extent of our dedication towards peace. As to the earlier part of your question, I am much flattered with your remark that I should continue to be in office. But I have made up my mind. I have also made the announcement that I wish to step down and if I don't, I will lose credibility. If I lose credibility, I will be useless; so I will step down.

Q: There are a lot of Chinese entrepreneurs here. In doing business, they are looking for peace and stability. In Malaysia, under the Barisan Nasional Government, we are enjoying peace and stability. Although we always say that we are not concerned with China, the truth is that there is always concern regarding the emergence of China as an economic giant. I think we are seeing the making of an economic block never seen before in the world. My question is how can China contribute to world peace and stability and how can overseas Chinese do their part?

Above all, I also have a suggestion that the Government should consider establishing a "bamboo network" to look at the needs of worldwide Chinese entrepreneurs who come to invest in Malaysia, in particular to safeguard their wealth? We hope the Government will look into this suggestion seriously and come out with a set of guidelines in the near future.

Dr M: I think Chinese entrepreneurs can play a big role to ensure that there is peace and stability in this world. But having said that, we must know that there are other forces trying to sway the objective to another direction. Firstly, China itself needs to enjoy peace for a long time. The system of government in China today has ensured peace ...maybe there are forces, which demand that China become more democratic ...if China should become more democratic, it has to be a slow process. If China moves on the fast track to be more democratic, it can be destructive to the extent of destabilising China and resulting in civil wars, which will be detrimental to the country itself, to Southeast Asia or to the rest of the world. So, we are quite happy with China as it is with its own system, getting prosperous and becoming a big market for the world.

With regard to the idea of having a "bamboo network", we would like to have more Chinese investments in Malaysia. If they want to keep their wealth in Malaysia, they are welcome to do so. If there is any obstruction, we will study if we can remove the obstruction. We will like to have rules to keep their faith in this country and for them to feel that their wealth is well protected. Investors can rest assured that we will not place some kind of restriction on you if we are not happy with you and if we don't agree with you. In some countries, as you know, if you have money in that country and you incur the displeasure of the country, they are likely to confiscate or control your money. This doesn't happen in Malaysia.

Q: Whenever you make a speech, the world leaders listen to you. You have been the sheer contributing factor and guiding light to the success of Malaysia. You have also made your thoughts and presence felt in the world. You are one of the greatest leaders in Asia. Would you consider assisting

Asian leaders to bring back the unity, integrity and dignity of the Asian people at the world stage, thus ensuring more justice to the Asian people?

Dr M: By not being a Prime Minister, I will not be able to direct things to be done. But if you want me to talk, I can talk and talk until I am blue in the face. If there is anybody who wants me to give them a few hints or unsolicited advice on how Asia can exert its influence in the world, become more united, I'll be happy to talk about it and point the way. That's all I can do after my retirement. I would also like to continue my friendship with other Asian leaders including, of course, Prime Minister Thaksin with whom I was for two days prior to attending this meeting.

Q: (translation from Chinese) ...you are a doctor and how can you play a role in the well-being of Chinese ...health care?

Dr M: Matters pertaining to health and well-being is not only for the Chinese. As for the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome outbreak, it was supposed to have originated from China and spread to Hong Kong, Taiwan, and other countries. The emergence of new diseases is a problem that the world would face in future, especially with the speed of travel from one destination to another. When people travel, they are healthy but carry the disease. When they reach (their destination), they still do not show symptoms, so we cannot quarantine (them), but they spread the disease. Doctors and healthcare providers are exposed to new diseases. Some of the diseases are HIV, Ebola virus, Japanese Encephalitis, new strains of malaria and tuberculosis and now SARS.

There is a need for more research in the field of herbal and traditional medicines.

Q: Malaysia is a beautiful country but in the passport and immigration there is warning ...death penalty for drug traffickers ...this gives a negative effect. Before your retirement, can you change this kind of prominent notice?

Dr M: We do not like this type of notice ...it deters people. We do not want to be unfair. We want to show how serious a crime drug trafficking is. If you are not trafficking drugs, there is nothing to fear. In 2002, 13 million people visited Malaysia ...400,000 from China and other parts of the world. I do not think it is a deterrent. I will leave it to the new Prime Minister. I will not do something that will create problems for him.

Q: What do you think about China in terms of export, risk and opportunities brought about by its progress? How is the relationship between China and Malaysia?

Dr M: China is some kind of threat to Southeast Asia. China is able to provide highly-skilled labour to foreign investors. This is a transitional period. Japan also had cheap labour, low cost of production was good. Then, cost of production went up. Then, investors went to China because of cheap labour but cost of production will go up. The Malaysia-China relationship is good. There is good rapport and understanding between two countries.

No fear of China becoming a military power and gobbling us up. We are near to China, but it has not conquered or colonised us. China has tremendous potential to become rich and prosperous, with the Chinese being hardworking and intelligent.

Q: Currently, Chinese entrepreneurs investing in China ...some succeed and some have lost ...your comment?

Dr M: China is quite new in receiving foreign investments as for over 50 years China had central economic planning. To make this adjustment takes time. China is a big country with central, provincial and city governments and as such each government has to work closely but sometimes a breakdown in communication is inevitable.

If this occurs, it can affect investment. In the case of China, we need a bureaucratic system that can deal with the day-to-day running of the central and local governments. But signs are there that there are already improvements in many areas ...Malaysia has long experience of accepting foreign direct investment ...incentives, stable Government and workers ...no strikes, fair wages.

The Government is business friendly. People are going to China and still coming to Malaysia to expand businesses.

We treat you like a friend.