

Aim to address imbalance

But it will take time to close economic gap, says Abdullah

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KUALA LUMPUR: The New Economic Policy (NEP) is not permanent and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi hopes its objectives will be met before 2020.

"The ambition of the NEP is to eradicate poverty and to restructure society.

"It is aimed at addressing ethnic economic imbalance and to close the gap between the indigenous and non-indigenous people," he said in an interview with cable news channel al-Jazeera.

Abdullah fielded a host of questions on national and international issues in the interview to mark the opening of the channel's English broadcast centre here yesterday.

The Prime Minister was also asked if the NEP was the reason the growth rate in Malaysia was lagging behind some faster growing nations in Asia.

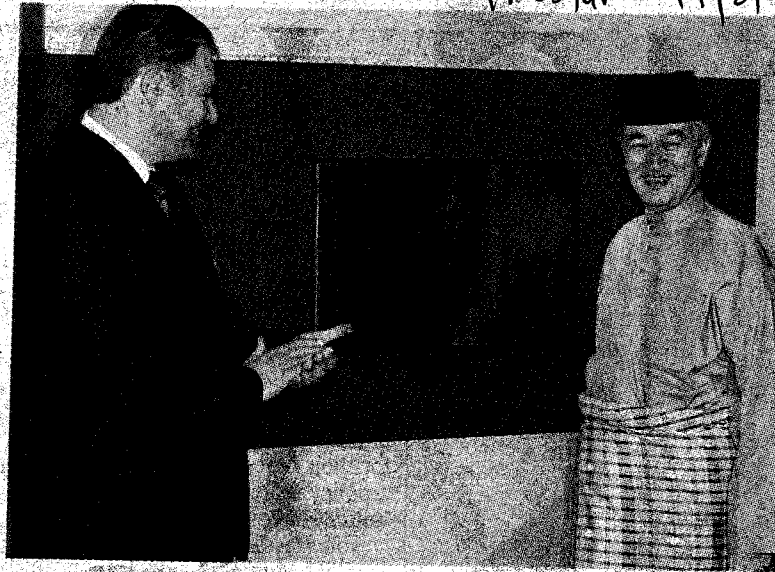
He said it was not an easy task, as the indigenous people previously had only 2% of the economic cake.

"We want to increase it to 30%." But it (the NEP) is not going to continue forever.

"Once the objectives are met, there is no reason for the continuation of the policy.

"The faster we get to the objective, the faster we will be able to throw away the crutch," he said.

On the issue of the United States' invasion of Iraq, he said:



All smiles: Abdullah posing for a photograph after he unveiled the inauguration plaque at the Al-Jazeera centre in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. With him is Al-Jazeera director-general, Wadah Khanfar.

"Let the Iraqis sort out their problems because the presence of the US gives some reason to certain groups to continue resorting to their acts of terror."

Asked whether he believed the US would attack Iran, Abdullah said he did not think so.

"I don't think with their (US) experience with Iraq, and with the increasing opposition of the Americans against the Bush policy, the president (George W. Bush) would go after Iran in the way he did with Iraq," he said.

Abdullah added that while a limit-

ed military action was possible, he "would prefer that no military was involved."

Abdullah stressed that the US should engage Iran in a discussion.

"We need to engage Iran, we cannot ignore Iran. Iran is a big factor in Middle East politics.

"You cannot engage any group by saying 'These are my terms, now we talk'. Engage them, talk about the terms. Engagement is better than containment," he said.

When asked about the issues between him and his predecessor Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad,

Abdullah said:

"I am concentrating on my job. I don't want to be engaged in this kind of verbal war.

"I have a job to do and I am doing it. Malaysians have noticed it. The economy is performing better."

Earlier, in his speech at the opening of the new broadcast centre, Abdullah said the media should not narrow down their news or issues to only a small group or region.

He recalled that when he was the foreign minister, he heard from leaders of South-South countries on many occasions that the media was "simply not interested" to give space for their viewpoints.

"It's about time we have alternative channels to provide opinions on many issues and situations around the world that will not only attract people in Europe but also the people here and in the globalised world," he said.

The prime minister, in welcoming the station's decision to house the centre in Malaysia, said Al-Jazeera was well placed to provide an objective view on issues and for the South to be heard.

"We are not imposing on you any conditions.

"You have the freedom to operate this station in any way you want because we believe you will be fair," he added.

The Qatar-based network began operating its English-language station at the Petronas Twin Towers here last year.