

Mahathir urges ministers to deliver

Herald Reporter

GOVERNMENT ministers and senior civil servants must be hands-on people who must not merely make decisions in their offices and after that go home to sleep, visiting former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

"When you have Government ministers doing the job, you get results," he told a civil service reform workshop in Harare.

Giving the example of Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said the country's 12 ports used to handle less than one million containers a year. However, because of the innovation of the then Transport Minister, who worked closely with the people on the ground, the ports are now handling at least 4,5 million containers yearly.

He said on attaining independence in 1957, Malaysia inherited a British system of administration.

But the government quickly realised that it needed a different approach with civil servants.

"Things moved well initially, but very slow. The population was increasing and the number of unemployed growing.

"Ours was an agricultural and mining economy which couldn't create enough jobs. One acre of land couldn't support one person and it became clear that with agriculture, we were having a high number of unemployed people," he said.

Malaysia then embarked on industrialisation to generate more jobs.

"Unfortunately, we had no industrial technology, no money and we didn't know the markets of the world. We were very ignorant on industries," said Dr Mahathir.

As a result, he said, government invited foreign investors not with the intention of making money from them, but wanted those who seized the opportunity to create employment.

"In the end, there were too many jobs and we had to import extra labour.

"It is fine to create jobs, but these labour intensive industries don't provide sufficient wages," he said.

He said Malaysia also subsequently realised that it had to "Look to the East" to countries like Japan and South Korea that were progressing rapidly so as to learn from their experiences.

He said the "Look East Policy" was not about industrialisation, but about drawing lessons from their success.

"Their (Japanese and South Korean) work ethics were unique because they were very nationalistic and hard-working.

"For example, the founder of Sony Corporation had no money to pay his workers, but he paid them with rice and sauce and the workers made sacrifices knowing that what they were doing would help their country in the future," said Dr Mahathir.

He said when Malaysia embarked on economic reforms, the country had to contend with an embedded and pervasive inferiority complex among the people which made them regard Europeans as inherently better and more knowledgeable than themselves. It took time for them to be disabused of the false and baseless notion and have self-belief.

"There is need for people to love their country. You just don't work for money. You must have the desire to make your country succeed and in the end you can stand tall among others when you succeed," he said.

"We broke that inferiority complex and we believed we could do what other nations did. We need to tell our former colonial masters that we can do better than them," said Dr Mahathir.

He said he found it surprising that it was always difficult to shorten procedures in government.

The Malaysian statesman said his country was able to overcome obstacles and succeed because it also adopted the concept of working closely with the private sector.

He said governments should not regard the private sector as some kind of enemy.

"The Malaysia Incorporated Concept helped the private sector to grow and government's revenue improved, hence the salaries of civil servants too," he said.

Dr Mahathir said for developing countries to succeed, they needed to have confidence in themselves and make the necessary sacrifices for success.

He said it was vital for developing countries to work with the objective of producing high quality goods that could compete on international markets.

Zimbabwe Broadcasting Holdings executive chairman Dr Rino Zhuwarara asked him about the approach Malaysia took to address the land question after it attained independence from the British.

Dr Mahathir said as in all colonial territories, much of the land in his country was allocated to British companies, but after independence Malaysia did not nationalise their

holdings.

"We built our own holding companies on land that had not been taken by the British and started buying shares in their companies and eventually ended up controlling one of their biggest companies.

"We were buying companies, but the British said we were practicing backdoor nationalisation," he said.

He said today practically all the mining enterprises and former foreign estates belong to Malaysian companies and these had grown to be giants.

"I am not saying that's what all countries should do. We still wanted all foreign investors to feel we wouldn't nationalise their companies so we paid for them," said Dr Mahathir.

Information and Publicity secretary Mr George Charamba asked Dr Mahathir about the instruments used by Malaysia to transform its society and whether his legacy was safe.

"The people must know and understand. Every idea must be put to them and explained. Some people and opposition parties will never understand — of course, that's their right.

"I don't know what is my legacy, but any leader would want his mark. I am not saying what I left must be executed without any changes," said the former premier.

Dr Mahathir said his country too had a national youth service programme that brought the nation together.

He said his country also suffered from the effects of a brain drain, but it contained the problem by offering better salaries and giving women the chance of taking up jobs once reserved for men.

He said employers and employees must have dialogue whenever they had disagreements and strikes must be the last resort.

"Everybody must bargain reasonably and there should be a good working relationship between employers and employees," he said.

Dr Mahathir later toured Dairibord Zimbabwe Limited where he was shown different stages of milk processing and some of the products the company makes.

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