

SPEECH BY: DATO' SERI DR MAHATHIR BIN MOHAMAD  
( PRIME MINISTER )

EVENT: THE OFFICIAL OPENING OF THE NEW CHANCERY BUILDING

VENUE: WASHINGTON D.C.

DATE: 15 MAY 2002

TIME:

I am very happy indeed to launch this new Malaysian Embassy in Washington, the capital of the most powerful nation in the world. Malaysia's presence here will not make much difference to this great country in terms of its politics, economy or foreign relations. But to Malaysia it is extremely important that we have our ears to the ground to hear what is going on so that we will be able to look after our interest and react in a suitable manner to the policies and situations resulting from the democratic process of periodical changes in Governments.

2. Here too is to be found most of the embassies and representatives of the countries of the world. We will be able not only to listen to their views but we will also be able to interact with them.

3. Obviously having an embassy in Washington would serve us very well indeed. It is costly for a small country but it pays. Although Malaysia may not be a very significant trading partner of the United States, but the United States is our biggest trading partner, accounting for a fifth of our exports and representing the biggest partner in terms of our trade. Roughly 20 percent of our trade of some 170 billion U.S. Dollars is with the United States. Quite obviously if the United States prospers we prosper and if the United States experiences a downturn as it did in 2001 our economy will be badly affected. In addition we have a large number of Malaysian students studying in the United States.

4. The political community in Washington I am told, is made up of some 171 embassies, 18,000 congressional staffers, 74,000 lawyers, 38,000 registered lobbyists, 4,500 correspondents and editors, political activists, hundreds of think tanks, public affairs and other types of consultants. All can impact on the way we conduct our relations with the United States.

5. The media has always been able to influence the thinking of people everywhere but never more so than now. The television has given birth to new techniques of reporting that can really shape the policies of nations and the world. Because this is the seat of the

most powerful Government, it is important to be able to gauge what effect the media reports have on the attitudes or perceptions of the decision makers of Washington. This places a great responsibility on the embassy and its staff to gather information for our Government and to advise us on what would be the appropriate action or reaction on our part.

6. For a long time Malaysia was not getting good factual coverage because of our habit of doing and saying unconventional things. But today circumstances has proven that we were doing the right things even if they were not quite orthodox. It had been very costly for us. But once people begin to understand us better, our relations especially with our erstwhile critics improved. We do not know how long this situation will last. We have therefore to ensure that we detect quickly incipient changes in perceptions and opinions so as to be able to correct them early. That is the task of our embassy here.

7. In setting up an embassy here the Government is making a good investment. We know we have profited much even though there had been quite a few hiccups. In fact without the embassy the number of hiccups could have been more and could last longer.

8. We have sent the most senior and the best foreign office people here. Ambassador Ghazzali should really be heading the Foreign Office but so important is this post in Washington that he has to make a sacrifice by staying at his post here. I would like to thank him very much. I greatly appreciate his work here and the arrangement that he has made for my visit. I would also like to thank all the embassy staff for their hard work. I know they will be inspired to do more with the new embassy that we have built here.

9. A building is of course not everything but at least it will enable the ambassador and his staff to work in more comfortable surroundings. I am sure our investment in the building will pay off.

10. On that note, I now declare this Embassy open.