

1. VMY 2014: Malaysia ready to welcome tourists: Muhyiddin

KUALA LUMPUR: Visit Malaysia Year 2014 (VMY2014) is set to offer wonderful experiences with a comprehensive range of products to cater the needs and preferences of the targeted 28 million local and international tourists.

Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said besides Malaysia's natural treasures of flora and fauna, from landscapes of impeccable beauty to cultural tourism, there were also various tourism products and services that would best suit any tourist coming to the country.

"These include the augmented tourism products and services under the key themes of affordable luxury shopping, nature adventure eco-tourism, health tourism, family fun, integrated, major events and business tourism," he said at the launching of VMY2014 at the Dataran Merdeka here, tonight.

Also present were Muhyiddin's wife Puan Sri Noorainee Abdul Rahman and Tourism and Culture Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz.

Muhyiddin said, VMY 2014 would serve as a tool to extend the bridge of friendship and promote better understanding of various cultures and heritage.

Besides socio-cultural benefits, the significance of tourism could also be underscored from the economic perspective, with hope to generate RM76 billion in tourist receipts this year.

"This represents a significant increase of RM11 billion in foreign exchange earnings," he added.

In 2012, the total tourism income generated in the economy was recorded at RM103.3 billion in 2012, representing a growth of 7.2 per cent, comprising RM62.5 billion and RM40.8 billion in international and local tourism receipts respectively.

"Having outlined the immense impact of tourism, I hope it serves as a motivation and a clarion call to all of us to offer our very best to the tourists in ensuring VMY2014 a phenomenal success," said Muhyiddin.

Meanwhile, he said Malaysia was well on track to achieve the goal of being a top tourist destination in the world, especially following the Lonely Planet's Best in Travel 2014 which had listed the country as one of the top 10 countries to visit.

CNN Travel also ranked Kuala Lumpur as the 4th shopping city in the world and three of Malaysia's pristine islands and beaches -- Perhentian Kecil Island, Juara Beach and Tanjung Rhu as among the Top 50 Beaches of the World's 100 Best Beaches.

"These accolades in the eyes of the world bear testimony of Malaysia being a premier tourist destination," he said.

To all Malaysians, Muhyiddin urged them to take the responsibility to ensure that the foreign guests were treated with the utmost respect and courtesy.

Deputy prime minister also gave his assurance that Malaysia was a safe tourist destination and this could be seen in the vastly ethnic groups living in harmony with a common bond of kinship and solidarity.

He said the government had also taken measures to ensure continued safety and security of tourists, including the National Blue Ocean Strategy of Police Omnipresence at tourist hotspots.

"To our guests and tourists, allow me to once again welcome you to celebrate VMY2014.

"Let this land of sunshine and warm friendly people capture your imaginations and hearts to bring home fond memories of your stay in Malaysia," he said.

2. Govt aims to create 3m jobs by 2020

HIGH-INCOME TARGET: Plan in line with developed nation status goal, says PM

KUALA LUMPUR: THE government aims to create more than three million jobs by 2020, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said.

In a Facebook post yesterday, Najib said the target was in line with the country's vision to emerge as a high-income nation within the next six years.

Najib, who is also finance minister, said more than one million jobs were created from economic initiatives since 2011.

"The government has fixed a target to create more than three million job vacancies by the year 2020, which is parallel to the country's status as a developed and high-income nation," he said.

He also shared a post by "Friends of BN -- Barisan Nasional" via its Facebook showing the number of jobs created between 2011 and 2012.

In 2011, 313,741 jobs were created. The number rose to 800,000 the following year.

Najib had announced last month that the Economic Transformation Plan, which was introduced four years ago, had generated RM220 billion in investments.

He had said that the investments from 195 projects launched under the National Economic Key Areas had created 435,000 jobs and contributed RM144 billion to the country's gross national income.

Public Services Commission chairman Tan Sri Mahmood Adam had announced last week that more than 100,000 vacancies in government departments and agencies would be available this year.

Mahmood said the commission received 2.1 million applications for jobs in the civil service last year, compared with one million the previous year.

He said the number of applicants among the Chinese and Indian community last year increased, with 44,633 applications and 75,361 applications respectively.

NEW STRAITS TIMES Tuesday January 7, 2014

3. Najib: Economic reforms vital to nation's growth

FOR SUSTAINABILITY: PM gives assurance that people's welfare will not be compromised

PUTRAJAYA: MALAYSIA cannot afford to be derailed from its transformation agenda and must carry out changes to bolster the country's competitive edge.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said while the country's objectives could not be achieved without carrying out changes, the government would not compromise on the people's welfare.

"If we are unwilling to reform and change structurally and strategically, we will experience a situation where Malaysia's growth will be slow and it will not be possible to secure a growth rate of between five and six per cent," he said at the Prime Minister's Department's first monthly gathering of the year yesterday.

Najib said the changes were crucial given the challenging scenario faced by the nation today.

A nation willing to undertake economic reforms supported by solid policies, he said, would experience more sustainable economic growth.

Najib said pledges made during the general election, including ensuring better prosperity for the people, achieving national economic growth of five per cent or more, carrying out strategic economic transformation programmes and enhancing human capital development, had not been forgotten by the government.

"The changes that take place, however, will not burden the people," he said.

Najib said despite the implementation of policies, such as subsidy rationalisation, it did not mean that subsidies would be immediately abolished.

"Nowhere else in the world (has a government) allocated RM49 billion for development and RM42 billion for subsidies.

"These alone show the government's sensitivity towards the people's needs, but it (subsidies) is just not sustainable.

"The way we reduce the (government's) burden or subsidy must be done in stages. And, wherever we can help to ease the burden of various segments of society, such as the lower and middle income groups and civil servants, it will be done."

Najib, who is also finance minister, said the people would continue to prosper if Malaysia's economy remained strong.

Last month, the prime minister announced that the Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) had attracted some RM220 billion worth of investments in three years.

He had said the investments were projected to contribute RM144 billion to the Gross National Income (GNI), create 435,000 new jobs and generate a knock-on effect that would catalyse economic activities.

The Government Transformation Programme and ETP are part of the government's national transformation policy.

The other programmes in the policy are the Political Transformation Programme, the Digital Transformation Programme, the Community Transformation Programme and the Social Transformation Programme.

NEW STRAITS TIMES Wednesday January 8, 2014

4. MACC nabs 2 Wisma Putra officers

PUTRAJAYA: The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission yesterday detained two senior Wisma Putra officers after the duo allegedly made false claims while they were attached to the Malaysian embassy in Washington D.C. in 2011.

The commission said yesterday the duo, in their 40s, had their statements taken over alleged false claims for using vehicles and logistical support during the APEC Summit 2011 in Hawaii, the United States.

The two were brought to the MACC headquarters here at 3.30pm yesterday and were being investigated under the Anti-Money Laundering and Anti-Terrorism Financing Act 2001. The total claims allegedly filed by the duo amounted to USD126,000 (RM378,000).

NEW STRAITS TIMES Thursday January 9, 2014

5. Dr M: Invest in hi-tech industries

TUN Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday asked the Pilgrims' Fund Board (Tabung Haji) and other funds to invest in high-technology industries.

The former prime minister said Malaysia has many funds with huge capital amounting to billions of ringgit but most of their investments are focused on building skyscrapers.

"Actually, investing in sophisticated industries can also better help us to realise our vision to emerge as an advanced nation," he said

Dr Mahathir said building high-rise buildings without using high technology, and furthermore using foreign workers, would eventually "result in the outflow of their income from our country (to their homeland)".

"If we venture into high-technology industries, we can utilise our engineering and scientific expertise to give higher salaries in tandem with the government's plan to transform Malaysia into a high-income nation," Dr Mahathir told a media conference after delivering a keynote address at the 6th Corporate Directors' Seminar hosted by Tabung Haji, here, yesterday.

Dr Mahathir, however, said the benchmark for an advanced nation was not merely the per capita income and the gross revenue of a nation but was seen from the aspect of sophistication and

technological advancement of a nation.

Citing Islamic countries as an example, Dr Mahathir said many of the countries have a very high per capita income, but are not seen as developed nations because they do not have the knowledge and high-tech expertise.

Meanwhile, Tabung Haji group managing director and chief executive officer Datuk Ismee Ismail said in line with Dr Mahathir's call, Tabung Haji is coincidentally studying several proposals to invest in certain industries.

"Most probably we will look into several investments this year, apart from existing investments in properties, fixed investments and shares.

"In 2014, Tabung Haji will pursue the present investment policy and strategy, in line with asset value and locations.

"Currently, Tabung Haji has enough funds, touching RM45 billion, for our management and administration. We will continue to consolidate our position and will look into investment ventures that will bring in good returns," he said.

On investment locations, Ismee said Malaysia was still among the main destinations for investments, especially for the property sector.

"We are looking for investment opportunities in the United Kingdom, Australia and Saudi Arabia," he added.

6. MACC to get tough on environmental law flouters

KUANTAN: The Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) is committed to wiping out corruption involving environmental issues as these could trigger natural disasters.

Chief commissioner Tan Sri Abu Kassim Mohamed said the MACC was taking the task seriously to avoid incidents, such as the Bertam Valley mud flood near Cameron Highlands on Oct 23 last year.

"We sympathise with the community living there. That is why we are focusing on matters concerning the environment and the safety of the people.

"Preventing corrupt practices and arresting those involved in such acts are crucial for us to create comfortable surroundings for the community," he said in his speech here before distributing flood assistance to 26 MACC officers and personnel from Batu Pahat, Johor; Kemaman, Terengganu, and; Kuantan, who had been affected by last month's floods.

7. MACC detains 3 over tender

PUTRAJAYA: The Magistrate's Court here today allowed an application for a remand order by the Malaysian Anti-Corruption Commission (MACC) against three individuals, including a special officer to a minister.

Magistrate Nur Dahlia Azmi issued an order for the officer and a businessman, to be detained for four days, while the third person, a woman secretary, for three days, beginning yesterday.

The three, aged between 31 and 48, were detained for giving or accepting gratification in the award of a tender

8. SPAD suspends licence of two taxi drivers

KUALA LUMPUR: The Public Land Transport Commission (SPAD) has suspended the licence of two taxi drivers for one month since Jan 6 for not using the meter and charging excessive fares.

They were also banned from driving or providing taxi service while the operators were given warning for failure to monitor their drivers.

SPAD Chief Executive Officer Mohd Nur Ismail Mohamed Kamal hopes that the people will continue to help nab taxi drivers who refused to use the meter.

"This negative attitude will directly affect the image and reputation of the the taxi industry and country especially during Visit Malaysia 2014," he said in a statement today.

SPAD took the action following an investigation after receiving two complaints via video and its Twitter account @aduanSPAD

9. PSD reviewing 100 schemes for civil servants

PUTRAJAYA: The Public Services Department (PSD) is in the process of reviewing 100 schemes for civil servants.

This exercise involves 800,000 civil servants especially those among others under grades N and W.

PSD director general Tan Sri Mohamad Zabidi Zainal said among the things that would be reviewed were qualifications and salary scale.

He had earlier received a courtesy call from Cuepacs president Azih Muda.

10. Safety is top priority for MRT Corp

KUALA LUMPUR: Mass Rapid Transit Corporation Sdn Bhd (MRT Corp) said public safety was a top priority at all Sungai Buloh--Kajang Mass Rapid Transit project work sites.

Responding to queries on the safety of structures at the Maarof Interchange, MRT Corp strategic communications and public relations director Amir Mahmood Razak said the site was one of the most challenging because of the extreme space constraints and heavy traffic.

"We impose a safety, health and environment (SHE) standard operating procedure (SOP) at all sites without exception," he said.

"First, this requires the sites to be hoarded up, which separates the work area from public areas.

"This varies between plastic New Jersey barriers or aluminium hoardings.

"This ensures that all work, including the operation of any machinery including cranes, will not endanger the public."

Amir said barriers were adjusted if there was not enough space to operate machinery. In extreme cases, he added, parts of the road may be closed temporarily.

He said sign posts and the appropriate reflectors and blinkers were installed to warn road users of the changes.

Amir said that the SHE and SOP prohibited lifting activities across live traffic.

"The work area at the Maarof Interchange and Sprint Highway is a very busy one, with Maarof being a major artery linking Petaling Jaya to Bangsar.

"So, if lifting needs to be done, flag men will temporarily stop vehicles from coming through. While inconvenient, this safety precaution is necessary to ensure public safety."

He said MRT Corp also ensured that the crane operators were certified and lifting activities were cleared by a lifting supervisor.

Amir added that these activities were recorded and audited.

"The implementation of and adherence to the SHE and SOP are the responsibility of the work package contractor's safety officer," said Amir.

"A supervising consultant monitors and audits the implementation of the SOP, while strict enforcement by MRT Corp and our project delivery partner ensures that our contractors are kept on their toes."

He said all workspace above live traffic, such as on the steel trusses above the Sprint Highway, were properly secured with barriers and enclosures to protect vehicles and persons that pass underneath them.

He said regular meetings were held by MRT Corp's standard and compliance department with all parties to ensure strict adherence to safety practices listed in the SHE and SOP.

Failure to follow safety procedures can result in warnings, point deductions in an internal merit system, stop work orders, dismissal of personnel or termination of contractors.

"MRT Corp is serious about safety on site, and while it may result in temporary inconvenience for the public, it is necessary to ensure public and worker safety.

"However, if the public feel unsafe or notice activities which they believe are unsafe, they should immediately call the MRT hotline," he added.

He said an investigation would be conducted within half an hour of full details being obtained from the complainant.

The MRT hotline 1-800 82 6868 operates 24 hours daily.

11.PM: Waive hawker licence fees

CALL TO LOCAL COUNCILS: Najib says this can spur entrepreneurship

SEREMBAN: PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak has pledged his support for the creation of more micro-entrepreneurs by calling for the abolition of petty trading licence fees.

He urged local authorities nationwide to abolish the licensing fees for petty traders and hawkers in a bid to spur more micro-entrepreneurs and make it easier for them to supplement their income.

"I support all local councils to abolish the permit (for trade licence fees for hawkers and petty traders) and hope all local councils will follow the initiative by Negri Sembilan Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Mohamad Hasan.

"It will create more places for hawkers and petty traders to operate," said Najib when launching the 2nd National Hawkers and Petty Traders' Day celebration at Dataran Senawang here yesterday.

Mohamad had earlier announced in his speech that local councils in the state would stop charging hawkers and petty traders for their trade licences, starting this year.

He said the policy would run for the next three years and urged enforcers to be lenient with petty traders who wished to set up businesses as it was done to support their families.

Najib also had good news for Muslim hawkers and petty traders who lacked funds to set up businesses during Ramadan.

"The government agrees in principle to set up a Ramadan Bazaar Scheme to provide interest-free loans, to be repaid in six months.

"We will refine this scheme and announce it in June, prior to Ramadan," said Najib.

He was referring to a request for incentives for such traders made by Coalition of Malay Petty Traders and Hawkers Associations Malaysia president Datuk Ramli Norani.

Najib also warned hawkers and petty traders not to rent out their business premises to foreigners.

"I have zero tolerance for hawkers and petty traders who do this.

"They must be responsible and not make an income by renting out these premises, which are provided by the government."

Later, Najib presented a posthumous award to the late president of the Malaysia Petty Traders Association, Roslan Shariff, in recognition of his contributions.

Other award recipients were Sarawak Hawkers and Petty Traders Association secretary general Kani-Isa Marican Sheikh Ismail; a fried chicken entrepreneur from Seremban, Datin Siew Swee Kuan; and tailor P. Selvam.

NEW STRAITS TIMES Wednesday January 22, 2014

12. PM: Govt may step in over prices

CUSHIONING IMPACT: 'We are always sensitive to people's concern about high cost of living'

PUTRAJAYA: DATUK Seri Najib Razak has warned of government intervention if the existing price mechanism continues to burden the people.

The prime minister said intervention would be carried out should the current system allow indiscriminate price increase to persist.

The government, said Najib who is also finance minister, had always been sensitive to the people's concern about the high cost of living. Several steps had been taken to address their burden.

"(For instance), I have asked the Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry Ministry to find ways to lower the prices of food items," said Najib at the Finance Ministry's monthly gathering yesterday.

Second Finance Minister Datuk Seri Ahmad Husni Hanadzlah, Deputy Finance Minister Datuk Ahmad Maslan and Treasury secretary-general Tan Sri Dr Mohd Irwan Serigar Abdullah were also present.

Early this month, the government introduced a year-long "Jimat Belanja Dapur" campaign that saw the Federal Agricultural Marketing Authority (Fama) lowering the prices of 21 grocery items by up to 20 per cent at pasar tani nationwide.

The National Fishermen's Association of Malaysia (Nekmat) has also agreed to lower prices of fish at all 585 pasar tani around the country.

Najib said he planned to visit the Putrajaya pasar tani this Friday "to check on prices of food items such as fish and vegetables. And, I have been told there will be more people at the pasar tani on Friday.

"If the (existing) price mechanism fails to work properly, government intervention will be carried out so that the people will no longer be burdened with unreasonable prices."

The Domestic Trade, Cooperatives and Consumerism Ministry had kicked off Op Harga 2.0 on Monday to monitor prices of goods and act on businesses that indiscriminately raise their prices.

The nationwide crackdown on unscrupulous traders involved 1,800 enforcement officers and 1,200 monitoring officers who would carry out checks at wet markets, grocery stores and restaurants.

Other measures taken to help the people include the 1Malaysia People's Aid (BR1M), Kedai Rakyat 1Malaysia (KR1M), Menu Rakyat 1Malaysia (MR1M) and Klinik 1Malaysia.

Najib also said the next round of BR1M would be disbursed soon.

Stressing the government's austerity drive was to reduce the nation's deficit and secure a balance budget, he said it was never intended to make the people suffer.

"It is never our intention to burden the people. In fact, I am here before you because of the people. And, all that we have done is for the nation and the people by restructuring our economy."

Najib also said countries that refused to restructure their economies would likely face a bleak future, including experiencing almost stagnant economic growth and losing investors' confidence.

"Measures such as subsidy rationalisation are being done in stages and we will still help those who need to be helped.

"The BR1M programme, for instance, is a programme that will help the government to ensure the aid will reach the desired target groups."

For Malaysia to gain developed nation status by 2020 and become a high-income nation, Najib said economic restructuring was a must.

"If we want to escape from the middle-income trap, we must reform our economy. Restructuring of the economy does not mean we are experiencing an economic downturn."

On his kangkung (water spinach) statement that was ridiculed on social media and sites such as Facebook and Twitter, Najib said he was merely using the water spinach as an example to explain the supply and demand principle.

"I was only giving an example of the (economic) principle. In fact, I do like kangkung and squid," he quipped.



Datuk Seri Najib Razak is greeted by Finance Ministry staff after attending its monthly gathering in Putrajaya yesterday. Pic by Mohd Fadli Hamzah

13. IMF raises global growth forecast

The International Monetary Fund said Tuesday that the global economic recovery is strengthening as countries move away from austerity budgets and their banking systems are fortified.

But the Fund remained cautious, saying the rebound in advanced economies is uneven and that they still face the threat of deflation.

Meanwhile, emerging economies are wrestling with tighter monetary conditions and slower domestic demand.

The Fund increased its estimate for world growth this year slightly, by a tenth point, to 3.7 percent, after a 3.0 percent pace in 2013.

It was the first time in nearly two years that the Fund revised its growth forecasts upward: rougher conditions than expected have forced repeated downgrades of its predictions.

"The basic reason behind the stronger recovery is that the brakes to the recovery are progressively being loosened," said IMF chief economist Olivier Blanchard, in the Fund's newest assessment of the global economy.

"The drag from fiscal consolidation is diminishing. The financial system is slowly healing. Uncertainty is decreasing," he said.

However, he added, there are significant differences between the United States, where growth looks "increasingly solid", and Europe, where growth remains weak and even weaker in the countries of the eurozone's southern rim.

Blanchard added that unemployment "remains much too high" in most advanced economies. But the Fund sees economic expansion continuing to accelerate into next year, when global growth should hit a healthy 3.9 percent.

Most of the gains will come from advanced economies as emerging markets -- which had been the source of strength during the crisis years of 2008-2011 -- are themselves forced to restructure to address capital outflows and diminished competitiveness.

Among advanced economies, the IMF sees US growth at 2.8 percent this year, euro area growth at 1.0 percent, and Japan at 1.7 percent.

The faster growth in advanced economies will help the others, stimulating demand for their exports, the IMF said.

Among the largest emerging economies, it forecast that China will grow 7.5 percent, India 5.4 percent, Russia 2.0 percent and Brazil 2.3 percent.

Even so, the IMF remained cautious about the future. "Strengthening global growth does not mean that the global economy is out of the woods," it warned.

With the exception of China, domestic demand remains weak and a challenge in many developing countries, as global financial conditions slowly tighten.

But many of those countries also face policy or political uncertainty, as well as bottlenecks for economic activity, "with the latter weighing on investment in particular," the Fund said.

The IMF said that a key worry is deflation in the advanced economies. The United States, Europe and Japan are all wrestling with uncomfortably low inflation, which, together with persistently high unemployment, has forced their central banks to continue strong stimulus programs.

"If people's expectations of future inflation drift down in response, actual inflation could turn out even lower than projected. That would increase real debt burdens and raise real interest rates, hampering growth," the IMF said.

It said the advanced economies, including the United States, should not be hasty in withdrawing stimulus or raising interest rates.

14. Focusing On Student Development

PUTRAJAYA: The newly-improved Assessment for Lower Secondary School which was introduced in 2012 will be implemented by the Education Ministry beginning this year.

Malaysian Examinations Board director Dr Na'imah Ishak said assessment will be 100 per cent via School Based Assessment (SBA), which involved four components — school assessment, central assessment, assessment of physical, sports and co-curricular activities, and psychometric assessment.

She also said that the Penilaian Menengah Rendah (PMR) examination will be continued but it will no longer be in the form of a central examination.

"The aim of the programme is to focus more on pupils' development and growth in learning. This is based on the objectives of the national education philosophy towards developing a student's potential holistically to create an individual who has high intellect and is balanced emotionally and physically," she said.

Na'imah said under SBA, teachers would be given empowerment in assessing their students. However, she added that the empowerment comes with the teachers having sufficient knowledge and skills in using various informal methods of testing and psychometric testing such as diagnostic general ability, and aptitude test.

"The assessment makes it possible for teachers to provide immediate feedback to pupils at each stage of the learning curve and enable teachers and pupils to identify their strengths and weaknesses during learning.

"The teachers can fill in the performance standard document once the students reach a certain level required in the assessment.

"They are given time to file evidence of the pupils' work to ensure that he or she has mastered the necessary subject, and as proof that the learner has attained the necessary skills needed," she added.

Quality assurance will not be compromised, added Na'imah, as the Malaysians Examinations Board will provide mentoring, monitoring, moderating and detecting measures to ensure the validity and reliability of the assessments.

SBA was introduced in 2011 for all government and government-aided primary schools, and in 2012 for all government and government-aided secondary schools.

Na'imah said SBA was introduced primarily to give more focus on pupils development and growth in learning rather than merely on their scores or grades. It was also to reduce the overreliance on data (grades and scores) obtained through central examinations in getting information about pupils in the school system.

"The idea was also to empower the school and teachers to conduct quality assessment of pupils, therefore, school assessment will be given due recognition and a significant place in the overall assessment system.

"It was also introduced to ensure that student performance is comparable to world standards in various areas of knowledge, skills and competence, with the introduction of a standardreferenced assessment.

"Some skills, for example data collection, implementation of a plan, laboratory skills cannot be effectively assessed by paper-and-pencil examinations.

"Therefore, SBA will enhance the completeness of public assessment and assess different facets of students' abilities," she explained.

Parents will also be able to keep track of their child's development through the online system which details their progress as they continue with their syllabus.

Although there were some initial hiccups to the system, Na'imah said they had managed to upgrade and enhance the system to accommodate the constant updates and data input.

"Some schools and parents are still not clear about the system and we are conducting continuous assessments and training to ensure that the system is delivered well to all," she said.



With SBA the focus will be on pupils' development and growth in learning rather than merely on their scores or grades obtained through central examinations

NEW STRAITS TIMES Thursday January 23, 2014

15. Govt to continue GST explanation at various stages

KUANTAN: The government is to continue explaining the proposed implementation of the Goods and Services Tax (GST) in all parliamentary constituencies after completing the ongoing state-level explanation, said Deputy Finance Minister Datuk Ahmad Maslan.

He said that after providing the explanation in Pahang, he would do so in Sabah, Sarawak, Kuala Lumpur and Negeri Sembilan. The state-level explanation had been completed in 10 states.

"After the state-level explanation, the explanation at the level of the parliamentary constituency will begin in February," he told reporters after the Pahang-level session attended by more than 2,000 people, here.

Ahmad said MPs, divisional chiefs and local leaders helped to identify the villages and the briefing was not restricted to the GST but also included the government aid for the people.

He said the government would continue with its explanation of the GST despite the attempts at sabotage by certain quarters through demonstrations urging the government not to implement it.

As announced in Budget 2014, the broad-based consumption tax will be enforced on April 1, 2015, and pegged at six per cent, replacing the 16 per cent Sales and Services Tax.

"We will continue to provide the explanation because the GST is the best taxation system, enforced in 160 countries. There is no other better system of taxation," he said.

Ahmad said the opposition political parties were against the GST but, at the same time, they were unable to offer an alternative.

Meanwhile, asked on the alleged delay in the distribution of the RM100 schooling aid vouchers, Ahmad said it could have been due to the distribution schedule at the level of the state education offices.

He said the aid of RM540 million had been channelled since Jan 15 for the benefit of 5.4 million students throughout the country.

NEW STRAITS TIMES Friday January 24, 2014

16. Malaysian education system heading in right direction: experts

LONDON: The Malaysian education system is heading in the right direction, with a solid foundation and all the ingredients for success in place.

This was the consensus among foreign education experts who, however, caution that care must be taken to ensure all plans are carried through and implemented effectively.

Andreas Schleicher, who heads the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, said the country had invested a lot in education with the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013-2015 and it was now a matter of making the most of it.

"The blueprint will only work if every teacher takes it to heart and every principal owns it. All the infrastructure is in place but a lot more than that is required to deliver this to every classroom."

Besides getting the support of parents, what must also be done is to "attract the best of teachers to the most challenging of classrooms and get the best principals into the toughest schools", he stressed.

What's optimistic is that there are already positive signs of improvement - Malaysia is one of the countries where the results for Mathematics in the 2012 PISA rankings exhibited the biggest growth.

"That is a very important sign," Schleicher, who is also an international adviser to the Malaysia Education Blueprint, said.

Another sign that points towards Malaysia being able to carry its plan for education to fruition was the existence of top performing schools in the country.

"These schools show that it is possible. There is good evidence in Malaysia; we don't have to look to Japan, Singapore or Shanghai...there are world class schools in Malaysia and they show that the highest level of performance is possible. But making that happen in every school, that is the challenge."

A country which also had a blueprint and was successful in implementing it, said Schleicher, was Brazil.

"When we did our first PISA assessment, Brazil was at the bottom. Today, it has achieved the most rapid improvement among all countries. It has woken up. Brazil does not have as good a plan as Malaysia but it shows what ambition and consistent delivery can achieve."

Michael Fullan, Professor Emeritus of the University of Toronto's Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and a recognised authority in education reform, said the ingredients in the blueprint were the right ones, but there needed to be hard work on the ground to get headmasters to be better leaders and for teachers to be stronger.

"There can be progress within a fairly short period, about five years, but steps must be taken to ensure teachers and principals have the skills to do it. Principals must not just manage schools, but lead in learning. It is a big shift. When teachers and principals are not prepared, they would not know how to engage and involve parents.

"The other challenge is communication, for principals and teachers so they understand what the strategy is. Communication with parents and the broader community is the other factor...with both problems and successes communicated," Fullan, who is also international adviser to the blueprint, said.

On Malaysia's plans to strengthen the teaching and learning of the English language, Cambridge English head of research and international development Dr Hanan Khalifa said: "The Education Ministry is on the right path to bring not just good, but very good English. The aspirations in the blueprint are spot on."

She said Malaysia was commendable because it was one of the few countries carrying out an evaluation of its students' proficiency in English. "It wants to improve using research, and collect the right evidence to know that it is achieving realistic targets. Not many countries in the world do this."

Expert in language assessment Cambridge English has been commissioned to carry out an evaluation of Malaysian students' proficiency in English and the results will be released in March.

Cambridge English assessment and operations group assistant director Martin Robinson said its observers who conducted the evaluation in Malaysian schools have concluded that English was being taught in "harmonious classrooms".

"The relationship between students and teachers is very good. This is one of the key early findings and it is a very positive one."

The evaluation by Cambridge English will place Malaysian students within an international framework that can be applied anywhere in the world. There are six levels - A1 and A2, which are basic levels; B1 and B2; and the advanced levels of C1 and C2.

"B2 is the level employers require, while C1 is the level accepted by universities such as Oxford and Cambridge as the minimum entry requirement. Half of native speakers will fail to reach C2 because it is a very high level, and would encompass ability to read academic texts and summarise them," said Robinson.

NEW STRAITS TIMES Tuesday January 28, 2014

17. RM30m in grants to aid Bumi entrepreneurs

KUALA LUMPUR: The government's commitment towards developing and empowering the Bumiputera economy received another boost with the launch of the RM100 million Bumiputera New Entrepreneurs Start-Up Scheme (Superb) yesterday.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said RM30 million worth of grants would be offered as seed capital this year to Bumiputera entrepreneurs or as start-ups in new sectors such as information communication technology, multimedia, content development, biotechnology, electronics and green technology.

The remaining RM70 million would be disbursed in the next two years.

He added that the grants would be given in stages to a maximum of RM500,000 to each company or individual.

"The government hopes these initiatives would benefit the various groups of Bumiputera entrepreneurs. God willing, we will announce additional initiatives to assist other Bumiputeras, too," the prime minister said after chairing the Bumiputera Economic Council (MEB) meeting in Putrajaya yesterday.

He also announced that government-linked companies and all ministries' key performance indices for their respective Bumiputera agendas would be announced in the second quarter of this year.

Such data, he said, would aid in improving the economies of Bumiputeras.

Najib also shared updates on the government's RM2 billion Bumiputera Facilitation Fund launched in August 2011, and Dana Teras, launched a year later.

To date, the two agencies responsible for disbursing the Facilitation Fund, namely Teraju and UKAS (public-private partnership unit), have approved a total of RM1.26 billion in grants to 116 companies for 127 projects.

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18. Malaysia to further strengthen ties with US, Korea and India

KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia will further strengthen bilateral cooperation, including on international issues of common interest with the United States (US), Republic of Korea (ROK) and India. In a statement issued today, the Foreign Ministry said the matter was discussed between Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Anifah Aman during the first courtesy call paid on him yesterday from the newly appointed Heads of Mission from the US, ambassador Joseph Y. Yun, ROK (South Korea) represented by ambassador Cho Byung Jae and the High Commissioner of India, T. S. Tirumurti.

"Malaysia has enjoyed warm and wide ranging substantive relations and considers all these three countries as an important partner in terms of political and economic links", it said.

The courtesy call had also provided an opportunity for them to acquaint themselves with Anifah.

Anifah also recalled the positive outcomes of visits in the previous year including the visit of US State Secretary John Kerry in October 2013 and both discussed future high level exchanges of visits during the call by ambassador Yun.

The discussion had also included the proposed US president Barack Obama's visit to Malaysia in April this year.

"Malaysia and the US enjoy long standing bilateral relations with cooperation in a wide range of fields including trade and investment, defence, security, education as well as science and technology," the statement said.

In the meeting with ambassador Cho, issues of mutual interest included the Second Wave of the Look East Policy (LEP 2.0), exchanges of high level visits, Asean-ROK Summit and current situation in the Korean Peninsula.

The ministry said Cho had expressed his desire and commitment to further elevate the cooperation between ROK and Malaysia to a higher plane especially in tandem with Malaysia's Economic Transformation Programme (ETP) and ROK's 'Creative Economy'.

In the meeting with Tirumurti, Anifah had considered India as an important partner from the South Asia Region and acknowledged both countries had enjoyed warm and wide ranging relations based on historical, cultural and economic links, the statement said.

"Currently, Malaysia is India's third largest trading partner, third largest export destination and third largest source of imports within Asean countries," it added.