

PM TELLS ASEAN: BE DOERS. NOT DREAMERS

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. — The hitch in the Asian-Pacific Co-operation (APC) programme remained unresolved today as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad outlined Malaysia's belief that Asean should consolidate economic co-operation within the grouping before seeking new frontiers.

He said that those who eyed the "vast" China market was dismissing the reality of Asean's great potential.

Dr Mahathir was speaking at the opening of the 18th Asean Ministerial Meeting at the Shangri-La Hotel here today.

The Prime Minister's address, which Malaysian officials described as a "landmark" speech, urged the "dreamers" who sought new frontiers of economic co-operation to recognise

the great opportunities within the grouping and to start moving instead of waiting.

The Malaysian stand that Asean should consolidate trade within the region before instituting an APC programme is at odds with a policy endorsed by Asean in Jakarta last year.

Asean Foreign Ministers had then agreed to an Indonesian-inspired proposal to co-operate with its five dialogue partners — the United States, Japan, Canada, Australia and New Zealand (the sixth, the European Community, was excluded) — to discuss economic trends in the world's most economically vibrant area.

To cement the agreement, it was agreed at Indonesian Foreign Minister Mochtar Kusumaatmadja's suggestion, that one project — a plan to develop human

resources — should start the ball rolling.

Malaysia, however, has had a change of heart and now feels that a "six-plus-five" (the six Asean nations and the five dialogue partners) format might lead to the domination of the regional grouping by the dialogue partners, a feeling shared by some diplomats of other Asean countries.

Dr Mochtar said on his arrival yesterday that the APC programme was initiated because developments between Japan, the United States and China might lead to affairs of the region being decided by the "Big Three."

"Clearly, Asean would not want that — that's why we took the initiative," he added.

The Malaysian about-face on the programme came at a recent Cabinet meeting

and Foreign Minister Tengku Ahmad Rithaudcen abruptly left for Jakarta last week to relay the news to his Indonesian counterpart.

Dr Mahathir defended Malaysia's stand today, saying that "statistics tell us what our deflected imaginations fail to grasp — that the Asean market is four times the size of the China market."

"It is time for those of us who believe dearly in Asean, who see vast potential for economic co-operation, to stop being merely dreamers and to be doers."

He added that the Asean market "is at our very doorstep, and not in a far-away land whose business practices and systems are uncertain, and in some areas still an unknown quantity."

"We now see some of our investors eyeing China as an attractive place for their investment, when vast opportunities exist in Asean in every way of business activity."

Dr Mahathir admitted that there may be serious obstacles in efforts to boost intra-Asean trade as the economies of the member countries were generally competitive rather than complementary.

"But can we not seek and exploit to our mutual advantage the many areas where it is complementary?" he asked.

The Prime Minister added that Asean owed an obligation to its people not only to consolidate the grouping but also to strive to break new ground and to take each new challenge and to turn it into a new opportunity.

A difference of views on

the APC programme also emerged during the opening statements by the Foreign Ministers at a closed-door session after the official opening this morning.

Thai Foreign Minister Siddhi Savetsila advocated a "building block" and a sector-by-sector approach to implement the programme which he said could contribute to greater stability, development and prosperity of the Pacific region.

Singapore Foreign Minister S. Dhanabalan felt that more needed to be done in Asean economic co-operation.

He added that he was aware that there were some who felt that a new impetus was needed, "but we should always remember that regionalism is a new experience for us."