

# 'Boost science, knowhow ties'

By VONG NYAM MING

THE Asean countries should strengthen their cooperation in science and technology to minimise costs and share the benefits, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

If they fail to put their research and development act together, they can forget about becoming a powerhouse of growth in the Pacific area in the next two decades.

"Already (Asean economic) growth has slowed and we know that it's due

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to too much reliance on primary commodities. Asean countries have to re-examine themselves and take corrective measures if they want to make the Pacific dream come true," he said.

In a hard-hitting speech at the opening of the Asean Science and Technology Week in Kuala Lumpur, he said the heady days of growth for Asean are over be-

cause commodity prices have slumped and will never be what they were in the last two decades.

Dr Mahathir said a small market and poor knowledge of science and technology were weaknesses that prevented Asean from being like Japan or NIC models like South Korea, Taiwan and Hong Kong.

"In a mass consumption economic world,

Asean countries are members of the junior league. We like to talk of our 250 million population and it sounds like a big market.

"But we're not one market, we're a fragmented market and in terms of purchasing power, we're equivalent to only 25 million Americans or Europeans or Australians.

"Such is the weakness of the Asean market that only three per cent of Malaysia's rubber is consumed locally," he said.

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Dr Mahathir said that while it might have been true that in some cases the advanced countries were unwilling to transfer their technology, it was also important to consider the readiness of Asean to accept new technology.

"At the risk of stepping on some toes, I would like to say that sometimes we are neither psychologically nor attitudinally prepared to receive the technology we need.

"If we have some special scientific or technological knowledge we would also be unwilling to impart such knowledge to our potential competitors.

"If we are going to get anywhere in the acquisition of technology, we must prepare ourselves fully and go after what we want," he said.

He said the Malaysian government would introduce tax and other incentives to encourage private sector participation in research and development, adding that such involvement could be through R and D collaboration with institutions in the country or contribution toward the central R and D fund.

Dr Mahathir said the vulnerability of the Malaysian economy to changes in external demand for its primary commodities had made the country realise the need for further diversification into manufacturing for export.