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MAHATHIR-CONGRESS

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KUALA LUMPUR, MARCH 13 (BERNAMA) -- DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD TODAY CALLED ON THE ASEAN COUNTRIES TO CONSIDER THE NEED FOR REGIONAL COOPERATION TO BE AT PAR WITH THEIR NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT. SUCH A PRACTICE COULD BE CARRIED OUT AS LONG AS IT DID NOT HAVE ADVERSE IMPLICATIONS ON THEIR NATIONAL ECONOMIES, THE PRIME MINISTER SAID.

HE ADDED THAT THE SURVIVAL AND PROSPERITY OF ASEAN DEPENDED ON THE WILLINGNESS OF MEMBER COUNTRIES TO COOPERATE BEYOND CURRENT INDIVIDUAL ECONOMIC CONSIDERATIONS.

ADDRESSING PARTICIPANTS OF THE FIRST ASEAN ECONOMIC CONGRESS HERE, HE SAID INTRA-ASEAN TRADE MUST BE RADICALLY IMPROVED AND THE CURRENT PREFERENTIAL TRADE AGREEMENT (PTA) SHOULD INCLUDE ITEMS THAT GAVE SUBSTANCE AND MEANING TO THE CONCEPT OF PREFERENTIAL TRADING.

HE NOTED THAT THE LOGICAL FOLLOW-UP TO ENHANCE INTRA-ASEAN TRADE WAS TO ENLARGE THE OPPORTUNITIES FOR TRADE BY OPENING ITS MARKET FOR PRODUCTS FROM MEMBER COUNTRIES. -- MORE
1215MST 13 03 87

U E155 AAE
MAHATHIR - CONGRESS 2 KUALA LUMPUR

+WHILE UNDERSTANDABLY, NATIONAL INTEREST WILL HAVE TO BE SAFEGUARDED, IT SHOULD BE TEMPERED WITH THE REALISATION THAT REGIONAL GAINS ALSO CONTRIBUTE TOWARDS NATIONAL GROWTH,+ HE SAID.

DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR STRESSED THAT ASEAN COUNTRIES MUST TAKE THE INITIATIVE TO ESTABLISH A CLOSER, MORE CONSTRUCTIVE AND COMPLEMENTARY RELATIONSHIP AND NOT WAIT TOO LONG TO ASSESS AND DECIDE ON NECESSARY ADJUSTMENTS IN FACING THE INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC SITUATION.

+SUBSTANTIVE STEPS MUST BE TAKEN IN REGIONAL COOPERATION AND IMPROVEMENTS MUST BE MADE TO THE EXISTING FRAMEWORK ON INTRA-ASEAN COOPERATION,+ HE SAID.

ON THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC SITUATION, THE PRIME MINISTER SAID IT HAD CHANGED TREMENDOUSLY SINCE ASEAN WAS FORMED AND THE MOST TELLING CHANGES WERE THE COLLAPSE IN COMMODITY PRICES AND THE FORCED DEPRECIATION OF THE RESPECTIVE ASEAN COUNTRIES' NATIONAL CURRENCIES.

THE LOSSES SUFFERED BY THE COMMODITY PRODUCERS LIKE ASEAN AND ORGANISATION OF PETROLEUM PRODUCING COUNTRIES (OPEC) MEMBERS MEANT DEFINITE GAINS BY THE DEVELOPED COUNTRIES, HE SAID, ADDING THAT IN 1986 ALONE THE DEVELOPED COUNTRIES RECEIVED SOME US \$100,000 MILLION FROM THE DEVELOPING COUNTRIES. -- MORE
1222MST 13 03 87

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U E156 AAE
MAHATHIR - CONGRESS 3 KUALA LUMPUR

TOUCHING ON PROTECTIONISM, HE SAID A PROTECTIONIST TREND HAD DEVELOPED DIRECTED LARGELY AT JAPAN AND UNFORTUNATELY MANY DEVELOPING COUNTRIES WERE CAUGHT BY PROTECTIONIST LAWS AND WOULD SUFFER LOSSES IN EXPORT EARNINGS.

THE PRIME MINISTER SAID IN THAT FACING THESE RADICAL CHANGES, ASEAN COUNTRIES COULD FOLLOW THE NEWLY INDUSTRIALISED COUNTRIES SUCH AS TAIWAN, KOREA AND HONG KONG WHICH WERE EXTREMELY WELL-OFF NOW OR TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE EXPENSIVE JAPANESE YEN BY BECOMING MANUFACTURING CENTRES FOR JAPANESE ENTERPRISES.

ALL THOSE ROUTES WERE WORTH TRYING AND WOULD HELP THE ECONOMIES OF THE ASEAN MEMBERS, HE ADDED.

+THE DANGER IS THAT WHEN OUR EXPORTS OF MANUFACTURED GOODS GO UP WE MAY BE FORCED TO REVALUE OUR CURRENCIES AS JAPAN HAS BEEN FORCED. WHAT ELSE IS THERE LEFT FOR US TO DO?+ DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR SAID.

AS A REGIONAL GROUPING, ASEAN MUST TRY TO FIND SOME ECONOMIC ADVANTAGE FROM WORKING TOGETHER AND THERE WAS NO NEED FOR THEM TO GIVE UP THEIR OWN NATIONAL ASPIRATIONS COMPLETELY, HE ADDED. -- MORE
1230MST 13 03 87

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U E157 AAE
MAHATHIR - CONGRESS 4 KUALA LUMPUR

THE PRIME MINISTER ALSO SAID THAT IN THE FIRST 20 YEARS OF THE FORMATION OF ASEAN, ITS MAIN THRUST HAD BEEN POLITICAL BUT MANY PEOPLE CONSIDERED IT AS A MIRROR IMAGE OF THE EEC WHICH WAS AN ECONOMIC COMMUNITY.

HOWEVER, THE DECISION TO COOPERATE POLITICALLY AND TO RESOLVE PROBLEMS AMONG NEIGHBOURS THROUGH NEGOTIATIONS WAS NOT TOTALLY WITHOUT ECONOMIC BENEFITS, HE SAID.

+THE DECISION TO COOPERATE POLITICALLY NOT ONLY MARKED THE MATURITY OF THE EARLY ASEAN LEADERS BUT QUITE DEFINITELY LAID THE FOUNDATION FOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS OF THE MEMBERS,+ DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR MOHAMAD SAID.

AMONG THOSE PRESENT DURING THE OPENING CEREMONY WERE TRADE AND INDUSTRY MINISTER TENGGU RAZALEIGH HAMZAH AND CHAIRMAN OF THE GROUP OF 14 ON ASEAN ECONOMIC COOPERATION AND INTEGRATION DATUK PAUL LEONG. -- BERNAMA
1241MST 13 03 87