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MAHATHIR

BY A. KARIM SHUKOR

SINGAPORE, DEC 15 (BERHANA) -- PRIME MINISTER DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR MOHAMED SAID ASEAN COUNTRIES CO-OPERATE VERY WELL WITH EACH OTHER, AND IN MOST CASES, HAVE BEEN ABLE TO AGREE ON A SINGLE APPROACH TO ANY PROBLEM.

HE SAID HE BELIEVED THIS SENSE OF CO-OPERATION WOULD EXTEND TO THE ECONOMIC FIELD, +IF ONLY BECAUSE THEY WOULD OTHERWISE BE CRUSHED BY THE WEIGHT OF SO MANY OTHER ECONOMIC FORCES.+

THE PRIME MINISTER WAS SPEAKING DURING QUESTION-AND-ANSWER AT A TALK ON +REGIONALISM, GLOBALISM AND SPHERES OF INFLUENCE+ ASEAN AND THE CHALLENGE INTO THE 21ST CENTURY+ HERE LAST NIGHT.

ON WHAT ASEAN SHOULD DO TO IMPROVE ITS COMPETITIVENESS AND MAKE ITS IMPACT FELT WITH THE LARGER POWERS, HE SAID +LOOK AT THE INTERNAL STRENGTH OF THE ASEAN COUNTRIES. THERE WAS A GREAT SCOPE FOR ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION+.

HE SAID THAT WITH AGRICULTURE, IT WAS PERHAPS DIFFICULT, BUT WITH INDUSTRY, IT SHOULD BE EASIER FOR MEMBER COUNTRIES TO COMPLEMENT EACH OTHER, ADDING THAT MANUFACTURED GOODS WHICH WERE PRESENTLY PROCURED FROM THE ALLIANT NORTH COULD, FOR INSTANCE, BE PRODUCED WITHIN ASEAN.

HE ALSO SAID IN INTRA-ASEAN ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION, IT WAS IMPORTANT TO RELISE THAT IT WAS PURCHASING POWER AND NOT JUST THE SIZE OF THE POPULATION THAT COUNTED. -- MORE

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THUS, MEMBER COUNTRIES COULD SHARE MANUFACTURED CAPACITY AMONG THEMSELVES IN PROPORTION TO THE CAPACITY TO BUY AND SELL, HE SAID.

WHEN ASKED WHETHER THE SLOWNESS IN ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION AMONG ASEAN COUNTRIES MIGHT DOOM THE REGIONAL BODY TO OBSOLESCENCE, HE SAID +NO, I HAVE STRONG FAITH IN ASEAN+.

WHEN ASKED ABOUT THE NON-ECONOMIC AND NON-POLITICAL FACTORS WHICH COULD HELP ASEAN IN THE 21ST CENTURY, DR MAHATHIR SAID HE ONLY THOUGHT IN MILITARY, POLITICAL AND ECONOMIC TERMS, BUT THERE WAS SCOPE FOR CULTURE EXCHANGES AMONG ASEAN COUNTRIES WHICH COULD HELP THE PEOPLES KNOW ONE ANOTHER BETTER.

TO A QUESTION ON THE IMPLICATION OF ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISM IN THE REGION, HE SAID FUNDAMENTALISM WAS DISTINCT FROM EXTREMISM, ADDING THAT ISLAMIC FUNDAMENTALISTS, LIKE HIMSELF, STUCK TO THE TEACHINGS OF ISLAM WHILE EXTREMISTS HAD THEIR OWN INTERPRETATION OF THE RELIGION.

DATUK SERI DR MAHATHIR ALSO SAID THAT NON-COMMUNIST COUNTRIES MIGHT BE ABLE TO HELP CONVERT THE SOVIETS BY FACILITATING THE REVISION OF THE COMMUNIST SYSTEM WHICH BREZNEV CHIEF MIKHAIL GORBACHEV HAD PROPOSED TO ACHIEVE BETTER ECONOMIC RESULTS. -- MORE

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HE SAID IT WAS NATURAL TO BE SCEPTICAL, BUT ADDED THAT GORBACHEV APPEARED TO BE SINCERE IN WANTING A CHANGE AND THAT UNLIKE IN THE PAST, WHEN THE SOVIET PEOPLE KNEW NO SYSTEM OTHER THAN THEIR OWN, PEOPLE WERE NOW TRAVELLING, SEEING ACHIEVEMENTS ELSEWHERE AND WERE BEGINNING TO WANT A BETTER LIFE FOR THEMSELVES.

+ONCE PEOPLE SEE A BETTER LIFE, THEY ARE NOT LIKELY TO SUBSCRIBE TO A SYSTEM WHICH HAS DEPRIVED THEM OF SO MUCH. WE WOULD FACILITATE THE REVISION OF THE COMMUNIST DOCTRINE AND BEFORE LONG WE WILL NOT RECOGNISE IT AS A COMMUNIST DOCTRINE.

+WE ARE STILL SCEPTICAL, BUT WE SHOULD NOT DISMISS EVERYTHING THAT GORBACHEV DOES AS A MERE STAGE SHOW. I THINK WE SHOULD GIVE HIM A CHANCE AND HELP HIM. IF THERE IS A RUSSIAN WHO IS WILLING TO STICK OUT HIS NECK AND PROPOSE THINGS THAT ARE, IN OUR EYES, MUCH MORE REASONABLE, WE SHOULD NOT JUST BRUSH HIM ASIDE.

+WE SHOULD DO NOTHING TO PUSH HIM OUT. WE SHOULD TRY TO GIVE HIM A HELPING HAND SO THAT THEY CAN CHANGE THEIR WAYS.+

HE ALSO ANSWERED QUESTIONS ON AMERICAN PRESIDENT-ELECT GEORGE BUSH, JAPAN'S RISE TO GREAT POWER, MALAYSIA'S BUNIPUTERA POLICY AND PAKISTAN PRIME MINISTER BENAZIR BHUTTO.

+THE FACT THAT THERE IS A WOMAN PRIME MINISTER IS NOT BAD IN AN ISLAMIC WORLD. AS FAR AS I AM CONCERNED IT IS JUST ANOTHER PRIME MINISTER, HE SAID. -- BERNAMA

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