

# DR M: I'VE FAITH IN ASEAN

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SINGAPORE, Thurs. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he has strong faith in Asean and believed that the bond among member countries would be strengthened further.

The Prime Minister said Asean's sense of co-operation would extend to the economic field.

Asean members co-operated very well with each other and, in most cases, had been able to agree on a single approach to any problem, he said.

Dr Mahathir was replying to reporters in a 40-minute question-and-answer session after his Singapore lecture yesterday.

Asked whether the slowness in economic co-operation between the Asean

countries might doom the regional body to obsolescence, he said: "No, I have strong faith in Asean."

He said that it might be difficult with agriculture but with industry, there was great scope for co-operation.

Asked about the non-economic and non-political factors which could help Asean in the 21st century, Dr Mahathir said there was scope for cultural exchanges among Asean countries which could help the people know one another better.

On what Asean could do to encourage a "sense of pragmatism" in Vietnam, Dr Mahathir said he believed that no country could isolate itself from the world for long.

He said Vietnam's leaders were beginning to see the futility of focusing its energy on its military instead of its economy.

Some Vietnamese, he added, were even talking about joining Asean in the future.

"They are thinking in terms of being in Asean because Asean has succeeded where they haven't succeeded. Being able to conquer a country doesn't make a country great."

Dr Mahathir also answered other queries on American President-elect George Bush, Pakistan Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's reforms, Japan's rise to great power status and Malaysia's bumiputra

policy.

To a question on the implications of Islamic fundamentalism for the region, Dr Mahathir made it clear that fundamentalism was distinct from extremism.

Dr Mahathir said Islamic fundamentalists like himself stuck to the teachings of Islam while extremists had their own interpretation of the religion.

He described what people called "fundamentalism" as a "passing fad" which was not likely to change the world.

"They are not the power people seem to think they are," he said, adding that these people were probably influenced by events in Iran.