

Dr M draws applause with witty speech

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By Hoo Ban Kee (P)

DENPASAR (Bali), Tues. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad drew applause and laughter with his sharp wit even on a dry and serious subject as the proposed East Asia Economic Group here last night.

In his 14-page keynote address, he spoke at length on the rationale behind the new concept which is to link Japan, China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South Korea and Vietnam to the six Asean nations.

With the end of the Gulf war and the emergence of a new global order, he likened the world of the early 1990s to Europe of 1775, as described in Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*.

He quoted an entire paragraph written in one long sentence, to describe Europe of 1775, adding that he believed what Dickens wrote aptly described the world today.

"It is indeed the best of times and the worst of times. It is indeed the age of wisdom and the age of foolishness.

"It is indeed the epoch of belief and the epoch of incredulity. It is indeed the season of Light and the season of Darkness," he told 1,000 top businessmen and academicians at a conference on Asean and the world economy.

Quoting Dickens, he added: "We had everything before us, we had nothing before us, we were all going direct to Heaven, we were all going direct the other way."

He continued: "In those days, they were not supposed to mention the word Hell and that's what he meant." The participants burst out in laughter.

The question-and-answer session saw some daunting questions raised by the participants.

An American told Dr Mahathir that Japan was the worst offender of protectionism and to include

it in the proposed EAEG would undermine the group's credibility.

Dr Mahathir said Japan had not yet decided whether or not to join the group. "But if Japan joins the EAEG and you still have problems, you can bring them to the grouping and we will help you solve them," he said.

Dr Mahathir said what worried him was the emergence of world trade blocs and super-rich and highly-capable nations closing their markets.

When another US participant lamented that the United States was no more a superpower but a "super pauper," he replied: "You expect me to cry over that?"

The question of "Muslim fundamentalism" was raised but Dr Mahathir said there was nothing to worry about.

He said these were deviationists. "They are anything but Muslim. We are the fundamentalists," he said.