

PM: Hard for small nations to survive on their own

By AHIRUDIN ATTAN

ONLY a strong regional organisation can offer the most credible arrangement in safeguarding the interests of small nations, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said last night.

The Prime Minister said small nations, on their own, will find it difficult to survive in the stormy waters of international politics.

He made these remarks at a dinner in conjunction with Thai Prime Minister Anand Panyarachun's first official visit to Malaysia. Mr Anand, who is on his maiden overseas trip since becoming Prime Minister of Thailand in February, leaves for Singapore today.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said

Malaysia advocates the strengthening of Asean in view of the spirit of regional and collective cooperation. "It is in the same spirit that Malaysia has proposed the formation of the East Asia Economic Group."

At their closed-door meeting earlier in the day, the two leaders expressed satisfaction with existing bilateral ties. Mr Anand has also reaffirmed his country's backing for an initiative by Malaysia to form the EAEG, despite strong opposition from the US.

In his address, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir also urged his visiting counterpart to give his full support for the strengthening of Asean and its secretariat.

"I am indeed glad that the report of the eminent five specially selected to examine and make specific recommendations for strengthening Asean will soon be tabled for consideration by all member states.

"Since you, yourself, in your previous capacity was involved personally in such an exercise earlier on, I am confident that you will lend full support towards such an effort," he said.

On the proposed EAEG, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said that while the grouping will be consistent with the principles of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (Gatt) and will not be an exclusive trading group, "it will certainly help each other prosper and increase intra-regional trade".

He said he is happy that Asean has agreed to study and elaborate on the concept. "I trust we have your support to make the concept a reality."

On Malaysia-Thai relations, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said the people of both countries should take pride in the high level of economic, cultural and social cooperation that exist between their countries.

He added that both governments are resolved to further enhance this cooperation by removing whatever obstacles that remain in the way.