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PM CALLS FOR COMMON APPROACH TO ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

KUALALUMPUR, Oct 7 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today called on Asean countries to speak with one voice "on environmental issues as individually they will be +victims of global campaigns now being mounted to make us permanent developing countries+ +United we stand a reasonable chance, + he said. +Allied with other neighbours our chances become even better. +

Opening the 23rd Asean Economic Ministers' Meeting (AEM) here, he said Asean could no longer remain passive and indifferent to these campaigns hoping that they would, in time, fizzle away.

The campaigns had assumed serious proportions and were being used to obstruct the economic growth of the developing countries, he said.

Noting that the non-governmental organisations involved had enormous resources and had the support of the so-called +free western media+, he said Asean must coordinate its efforts to counter the campaigns before they become more damaging to its economy.

+We can do this through a massive information campaign at the international level and by adopting a common stand on environmental issues, + he said.

He added that although this would involve financial back-up, the price for not doing it now would be much higher later.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said Asean countries were very concerned about environmental pollution but that their capacities to deal with it were limited.

+The developed countries should have a more positive approach rather than threaten to use trade and aid as instruments to force us into doing those things which will retard the growth of our economy and the well-being of our people, + he said.

Referring to the forest fires which have cast a thick haze over Asean countries, the Prime Minister said forest fires were more damaging than controlled extraction of timber.

+But whereas the whole western world is in an uproar over our extraction of tropical timber and threatens to boycott our produce and destroy our economies, there is not a squeak about the forest fires which periodically plague us, + he said.

+Perhaps it is because the haze does not spread to their countries. Perhaps it is because they cannot sound as noble as they do when they champion the Penans. +

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said there was much that was positive that the rich countries of the North could do about the forest fires.

+Indeed, with their ingenuity and wealth, they can put out the fires as they have extinguished the oil-well fires in Kuwait with such handsome profits, + he said.

But none of these things were happening, he said. +There is not a word from the environmentalists of the North or their proxies here. + -- Bernama