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MAHATHIR SAYS PACE OF ASEAN ECONOMIC CO-OPERATION STILL SLOW

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 7 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today lamented that the pace of Asean economic co-operation was still painfully slow because of various hurdles that lay in its path.

He said it was now almost four years since the last Asean Summit, at which various proposals were made to promote further Asean economic co-operation.

We seem to lack the political courage needed to move ahead and implement co-operative projects that will benefit us in the long term, he said at the opening of the two-day Asean Economic Ministers Meeting here.

He said that if Asean were to enter the 21st century as an economic and political force that would be respected by others, then we will have to take the painful decision now before events overtake us.

Referring to the Asean Secretariat, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said the important role of the secretariat and the functioning of Asean as an organisation must not be neglected as Asean forged ahead with various programs in economic and trade co-operation.

An organisation could only be as good and effective as the secretariat that supported it, he said. -- more

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He felt that the secretariat had to be revamped along with the various Asean committees to ensure that decisions were made expeditiously and implemented.

As the thrust of Asean's activities will be in the economic field, this aspect will need to be emphasised and strengthened in any future reorganisation of the Asean structure, he added.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir also called on research institutions in Asean to co-ordinate their efforts and share more information in the scientific and social fields.

Although work had been done to some extent in certain areas, more could be done, he said.

He said large sums of money were spent each year by Asean countries to engage foreign consultants to conduct studies although the same expertise was available within the region at a fraction of the cost.

He said research in commodities had been one of Asean's strengths, given its importance to the region's economies.

The prime minister said that while it was accepted that this was an area where countries would be reluctant to share because of the economic implications, we cannot totally discount the possibilities of co-operation.

Citing the case of palm oil and coconut oil, he said both these products had been victims of a vicious campaign to discredit them by certain foreign groups.

Through more sharing of information and co-ordination of efforts among the institutions and agencies in the countries concerned, campaigns such as these could perhaps be countered more effectively, he said. -- Bernama