

Functions more important than name, says Dr M

By Robert Goh

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. — Changing the name of the proposed East Asia Economic Group (EAEG) to that of East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) is not important, **Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad** said, adding that what it does is

The Prime Minister, asked to comment on the decision made by Asean Economic Ministers on the matter, said: "A rose by any other name is just as sweet. What's important is what it does, rather than its name."

Dr Mahathir, speaking to newsmen after opening the Commonwealth Finance Ministers meeting here today, said he was happy that the Ministers had reached consensus on the proposal.

In their joint communique issued yesterday, Asean Economic Ministers had endorsed the Malaysian proposal but had decided to

change its name to EAEC to clear the misinterpretation among some quarters who felt that the EAEG was to be a trade bloc on a structured entity.

Asked if the EAEC was going to be different from its original form, Dr Mahathir replied that this depended on one's interpretation.

He said: "Our concept was not for it to be a structured grouping with a formal secretariat to formulate policies. It was to be a forum for East Asian countries to meet whenever the need arose, to discuss international issues and to defend free trade."

"The idea is for those in the group who are less developed to be given help by others in the group who are more developed. It is only when they are developed and prosperous that they

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Asean heads expected to endorse EAEC

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can become a good market within their grouping," he added.

Asked whether the Economic Ministers endorsement on the EAEC would trigger a rally from some countries to join the caucus, Dr Mahathir said that this was difficult to anticipate but it was obvious now that there was a need to explain the concept to some countries which were still reluctant to join.

Asean Heads of Government Meeting in Singapore scheduled in January is expected to endorse the EAEC concept.

Asked whether he still wanted Japan to lead the caucus, the Prime Minister said: "I can't remember saying that Japan should be the leader but I do remember wanting Japan to become a member."

In the absence of a leader, Dr Mahathir said that somebody could be chosen as a spokesman for the caucus and that he might very well come from a small country, provided that the spokesman speaks out the feelings of caucus members.

Dr Mahathir was also asked to elaborate on what he meant by arm twisting, and whether he was subjected to such tactic for speaking frankly on sensitive subjects.

He said Malaysia had been subjected to "a little bit of arm-twisting here and there" by certain countries. "You don't see it but we feel the pain," Dr Mahathir told the foreign journalist who

raised the question.

Asked how Malaysia was being pressured for speaking out, he said he was not at liberty to do so because it affected certain countries which he declined to name.

In his speech, the Prime Minister had said that if freedom of speech was being espoused, then a country should be allowed to speak its mind without punitive action being taken against it when it did so.

In Tokyo, a senior Foreign Ministry official indicated today Japan had softened its position toward the idea of forming an East Asian Economic Group.

The source was referring to yesterday's decision by the Economic Ministers of the Asean to endorse the formation of an EAEC that would ideally include Japan, **Bemama** reports.

"The discussions now appear to be proceeding in a positive direction," the source said.

He noted that Japan "could not go along 100 per cent" with the original proposal of Dr Mahathir for an EAEC.

Japan had taken a cautious attitude toward Dr Mahathir's proposal because it did not include membership for the United States, which led Washington to strongly oppose the group's formation.

The source suggested that the formula endorsed by the Asean Economic Ministers in Kuala Lumpur had been revised, but he said the Foreign Ministry was hot yet aware of a resolution to the US membership problem.