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MAHATHIR QUESTIONS WHY EAST ASIA CANNOT FORM CAUCUS
Mahathir-EAEC

SINGAPORE, Jan '27 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today questioned why East Asian countries were not allowed to form an economic caucus when powerful economic groupings have emerged elsewhere to advance regional interests.

The Malaysian Prime Minister posed this question, appeared to be directed at the Bush Administration, when addressing the opening of the Fourth Asean Summit here today.

During a visit to Singapore earlier this month, President Bush expressed US' opposition to the formation of the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) which Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir said would essentially be an informal gathering of nations in East Asia for the purpose of consultation and to speak with one voice at international trade conferences.

Washington was also active in dissuading Japan, South Korea and Indonesia from supporting the EAEC.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir reiterated that the EAEC would not be any kind of trade or economic bloc. -- more

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+We do not understand why we are not allowed to speak with each other or even call ourselves East Asians.

+Is this a foretaste of the new world order?+ he asked.

He said the creation of powerful economic groupings to advance regional interests had become a reality of international economic life.

+International trade and other economic relations are increasingly being managed to protect the positions of the powerful trade blocs,+ he added.

He said in a world where peoples and countries were organising themselves regionally, it should not be so wrong for East Asian countries to come together.

+East Asia,+ he asserted, +is a geographical entity as much as Europe or America are geographical entities. Indeed, so is South East Asia.+

He saw no reason why the East Asian countries could not form a mere caucus and co-exist with other organisations in the Asia Pacific region if South East Asia could form an association to derive mutual benefit and still remain compatible with being members of the Asia' and Pacific organisation.

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He explained that the Asean experience had shown that when countries in a region consulted, cooperated and spoke with one voice, their status and influence were enhanced.

+Other countries and groups would certainly not have dialogue regularly with each and everyone of us separately. But as a group, they will and they do. And in the process, we have gained and consequently developed much faster than individual countries of the region,+ he said.

In this context, he said a strong Asean base was needed to be better able to face new uncertainties in the wider Asia-Pacific environment as well as a rapidly changing world.

He added: +When the Cold War was on, we all yearned to be free from this oppressive conflict and the proxy fights and divisions it spins off.

+We in the Asean region have a right to be more free now since it is our side which won. But it would seem that we are now less free.

+The evolving new world order is full of restrictions.+ -- Bernama

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