

PM: Asean can be

THIS meeting is timely because Asean needs to consider appropriate responses to the profound changes that have taken place in the world since the last Asean Summit in Manila in 1987. The final disposition of the new global political and economic order is uncertain but we must ready ourselves for all the possible mutations of this order. In Southeast Asia itself, changes will take place, and the form of co-operation which will result must be such as to strengthen our region and keep it continuously dynamic.

With the Cambodian problem on the way to resolution, Asean must now transform the adversarial stance which characterised Southeast Asia in the past into new constructive relationships. It is not an accident that the Southeast Asian countries of the Asean group are among the most dynamic in the world. We have demonstrated that peaceful neighbourliness and co-operation and a willingness to help each other can contribute greatly towards rapid development. It is therefore equally likely that if all the nations of Southeast Asia were to adopt this approach to neighbourly relations and economic development, then all will be equally prosperous. A prosperous region will command respect and influence.

Asean must therefore take the initiative to reorganise its relations with the Indo-Chinese countries. We can begin by establishing close and positive relations with them, both bilaterally and as a group. Should they wish to do so we should welcome them as members of the Asean group, subscribing to our Treaty of Amity and Co-operation. We should promote and foster the concept of a Zone of Peace, Freedom and Neutrality as well as a Nuclear Weapon Free Zone. I hope that the greatest military power with the most efficient intelligence agency is wrong when it predicts the possibility of a "Gulf War" in East Asia which can only be deterred by its military presence. By now all the nations of East Asia should have learnt of the futility of wars of conquest of the Gulf variety. They should have found that economic development and trade with neighbours are highly beneficial.

Poor neighbours are no asset to anyone. The problems of the poor are likely to spill over in the form of refugees, smuggling, black markets, etc. Poor countries are not good trading partners. Helping neighbours to become prosperous is therefore mutually beneficial. If Asean wishes to be stable



Dr Mahathir speaking at the opening of the Fourth Asean Summit in Singapore yesterday. NST picture by Goh Seng Chong

and prosperous then it must help its neighbours to attain prosperity. Above all, it must eschew confrontation.

While we should not let our different political systems stand in the way of mutual co-operation, we cannot, of course, support oppressive regimes which are not concerned with the

cal rights, deporting them, terrorising and killing them and generally behaving like a rogue but being supported by other democracies simply because it is defined as democratic. The empty shelves and the hunger we see in the new democracies of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) and

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well-being of their own nationals. Without interfering in the internal affairs of independent countries we must still strive to ensure acceptable standards of good Government. It is the height of arrogance to claim that only a particular system is right and just. It is equally arrogant to claim that there is only one system of Government which is right and just. The fact is that even democracy can bring misery to a lot of people. This we see in the violence and deaths during elections and the frequent riotings and strikes which reduce the productivity of nations and perpetuate poverty.

We see today a democratically elected Government systematically depriving its legitimate citizens of politi-

eastern Europe are yet another evidence of the imperfections of democracy. We must not miss the forest for the trees. Democracy is not the universal cure it is made out to be. To succeed there must be circumspection in the application of the democratic process. No one should be forced or hurried into a system they are not familiar with.

On the international front, the creation of powerful economic groupings to advance regional interests has become a reality of the international economic life. International trade and other economic relations are increasingly being managed to protect the positions of the powerful trade blocs.

In a world where peoples and countries are organis-

more prosperous

speech at the Fourth Meeting of the Asean Heads of Government

ing themselves regionally, it should not be wrong for East Asian countries to come together. East Asia is a geographical entity, as much as Europe or America are geographical entities. Indeed so is Southeast Asia.

If Southeast Asian countries can form an association in order to derive mutual benefits and still remain compatible with being members of the Asia Pacific organisations, is there any reason why the East Asian countries cannot form a mere caucus and co-exist with other organisations in the Asia Pacific region?

The Asean experience has shown that when countries in a region consult and cooperate and speak with one voice, their status and influence are enhanced. Other countries and groups would certainly not have dialogues 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 have consequently developed much faster than other individual countries of the region.

The East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) will not be any kind of trade or economic bloc but a caucus, an informal getting together of nations in East Asia for the purpose of consultation and to seek consensus so as to speak with one voice at international trade negotiations. And that is all. We do not understand why we are not allowed to speak with each other or even to call ourselves East Asians. Is this a foretaste of the new world order?

We need a strong Asean base to be better able to face new uncertainties in the wider Asia-Pacific environment as well as a rapidly changing world. 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.

An issue of equal importance to all countries and requiring global co-operation concerns the management of the environment. Unfortunately, there is undue focus on the tropical forest and its role in renewing the supply of oxygen, the preservation of flora and fauna and the ecological balance.

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The fact is that the rich 20 per cent of the global population accounts for 80 per cent of the greenhouse gas emissions. Thirty per cent of carbon dioxide emissions come from one industrial power alone. On the other hand, in the developing world, 1.5 billion people live in abject poverty. Their fate is ignored when what is of-

ten their principal source of income, the tropical forest products, are boycotted.

If forests can save the world from the greenhouse effect, then the stress should be on massive re-greening of the world. It must be remembered that at one time the world was almost completely covered with forests. The natural changes as well as the changes brought about by men destroyed most of the forest cover. With the wealth of the rich and the technology at their command it is entirely possible to plant and cover even desert areas with trees, including tropical hardwood trees. Controlled logging can go on but in a hundred years there will be three times the present tropical timberland.

One issue, totally ignored,

is the fact that forest fires cause greater damage to the environment than controlled logging. Developing countries do not have the financial and technological capabilities to effectively handle forest fires which can rage for weeks and months. Certainly more forests can be saved by preventing forest fires or put-

ting them out quickly than by boycotting the export of tropical timber or advocating that forest dwellers remain in the forest, eating monkeys and suffering from all kinds of tropical diseases.

It is claimed that tropical forests are a common heritage of the world. We dispute this, for we have a better claim to our forests than those who claim to own Antarctica. But if the world is so concerned about depleting tropical forest and think they have a right to it then they should do something about forest fires in the tropics. Massive and valuable equipment are available all over the rich countries in the North. Most of them would be under-utilised when there are no fires. It would be a simple matter of an international organisation to be set up to catalogue all these resources and deploy them to the poor tropical countries whenever there is a forest fire. This is much more constructive than dramatising the acreage of tropical forest destroyed per day or how 300 Penan are being deprived of their hectares of hunting ground.

While we dispute the claim that our forests belong to the whole world, we have always accepted that certain straits and sea-routes through our waters are international waterways. The best known of these international waterways is the Straits of Malacca.

It was of little concern to the littoral States when the ships passing through the straits were small and infrequent and carry no significantly dangerous cargo. But

now not only have the numbers multiplied many times, but their sizes have increased tremendously. In addition, the cargo they carry is often dangerous; as for example the oil and chemical tankers.

Already we have had collisions and the spillage of oil in the sea and on our shore. Not only is cleaning up costly but damage to our fishing industry and our tourism industry is considerable. It takes months for fishing to be lucrative again.

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Now we have a new problem - piracy. The pirates are not after the cargo but the cash and valuables belonging to the crew. In the dark of the night, they clamber on to the ship and tie up the crew while they pilage and rob. And when they leave, the crew members remain tied. For hours, the ship will sail unguided. It may deviate from its course and it may collide with another vessel or run aground, causing all kinds of damage.

Whose responsibility is it to keep these international sea-lanes safe? The littoral States collect no dues. Nor are they rich. On the other hand, maritime patrols by sea and by air are expensive. The maintenance of equipment and personnel to fight spillage and other damages are equally costly.

If the world is fond of claiming rights then the world must also accept responsibility. It is time that

the international community appreciate the problems and the dangers faced by the littoral States. Is it too much to ask that those who use the passage and the maritime nations contribute towards the cost of keeping them free and safe?

Asean is without doubt the most successful of the regional groupings of developing countries. We came together initially because we had to have a forum to resolve border problems in the post-colonial period. We

have not resolved all of these problems but at least we agree that the Asean way is that of consultation and negotiation.

Having come together, we felt it would be beneficial to co-operate economically as well. Again, with our competing economies we have not been very successful. Still we must soldier on.

But in the meantime, the world has changed radically. I shall not repeat here what these changes are. What is certain, however, is that we will be affected by the fallout. We can survive, I think. We can even prosper as a result of these changes. But it is up to us to design our response if we want to come out of these changes stronger and more prosperous. It will require all our ingenuity to do this. Asean must emerge from the restructuring of the world, freer and more resilient and better developed than ever.