

NOW TO WOO THE OTHERS

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(P) *overseas*

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SINGAPORE: The stage is set for Asean to move into the next phase of the East Asian Economic Caucus — getting others in the geographic region to take part in it.

That will be the task of the Asean ministers, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir yesterday.

As far as he was concerned, Asean has finished with talking and clarifying the EAEC which has been endorsed by the leaders in the Singapore Declaration.

"I hope it will take off in less than five years," he told a press conference at the end of the summit.

Dr Mahathir said he was satisfied with the outcome of discussions on the EAEC over the past two days.

He downplayed suggestions of differences of opinions on EAEC with President Suharto and said:

"We think Indonesia needs to seek clarification and clarification having been given, Indonesia has agreed. As far as I am concerned, we have made progress," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the number of times the EAEC was mentioned in the Singapore Declaration was irrelevant, adding "what is relevant that the Asean has accepted the EAEC."

The concept, he added, would now go to the implementation stage and steps would be taken to realise the objective: of making the EAEC a reality.

"This will mean, Asean Ministers will have to meet the potential members of EAEC in order to explain what he caucus is all about and how we would go about making it materialise," he said.

Dr Mahathir also made an impor-

tant clarification — the EAEC would not be under the umbrella of Apec (Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation) but there was no reason why it could not co-operate with Apec.

He pointed out the North American Free Trade Area (Nafta) formed by the United States, Canada and Mexico was not under the umbrella of Apec.

If it was all right for the United States to form Nafta outside Apec, Dr Mahathir said he could not understand why countries in East Asia could not do likewise with EAEC.

On the position of Japan and South Korea to the EAEC, he said it would be "less than ideal" if these two countries were not included.

He said Asean would, however, continue to persuade the two countries to join although he admitted it would be a task.

Malaysia, he said, was not out to cause any problem for Japan and that it wanted to see the United States to be a little more understanding.

"I think at heart they want to join but somebody is always telling them they have an obligation elsewhere," he said.

On reports that the EAEC had been seen as a wedge between the Japanese and the United States, Dr Mahathir replied: "The wedge is already there. It is not our making ... there has always been this problem between the

United States

He said that wedge is as competitive when they are think they are more fear of 1

Dr Mahathir Americans with their ability nese.

Asked whether linkages with bloc comprising and Taiwan the said: "We don't want to see a new economic bloc at Asian economies"