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From Abdul Rahman Sulaiman

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DUBLIN, Sept 22, (Bernama) -- Malaysia tonight offered its hand of friendship and pledged to work together with Ireland to protect their mutual interests from being drowned by stronger and more developed countries.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who made the gesture, said although the two countries belonged to regional organisations, Malaysia with Asean and Ireland with the European Community, it was imperative that being small nations, they cooperate and strengthen further their mutual ties.

Dr Mahathir, now on a four-day official visit to Ireland, was speaking at a dinner given in his honour by his Irish counterpart, Albert Reynolds, at the Royal Hospital, Kilmainham, here.

Stressing that small countries on their own could have their interests drowned by stronger and more developed countries, the Malaysian prime minister said: +One does not need to look back into history for lessons to illustrate the reality that small countries are expendable, especially when their fate has no bearing on the well-being of bigger nations.+

Describing Malaysia-Ireland relations so far as +generally warm and friendly+, the prime minister felt that it was essentially passive.

+We are like two neighbours who have been in talking terms for a long time, but whose friendship had never gone beyond acquaintanceship+ -- more

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However, in an era when ideology was taking a backseat in relations between countries, Dr Mahathir was certain that it was now timely for the two countries to stimulate more interaction and place their bilateral relations on a much stronger footing.

In this connection, Dr Mahathir, who earlier had four-eye talks with Prime Minister Reynolds, said he was pleased that they were generally in agreement over the potentials of expanding the scope and depth of their relations.

He said insofar as Malaysia was concerned, it was committed to the maintenance of free trade with other economies of the world.

+For us, the existence of a free and open international trading system is crucial.+

+It has therefore been of major concern to us to witness the gradual formation of regional economic groupings that show all the signs of coalescing into trade blocs,+ he said.

Citing the EC as an example, Dr Mahathir said the community itself was slowly moving towards economic independence from the rest of the world.

This was so no matter that the progress towards this end was being complicated by developments within the community itself or in the larger European theatre.

Across the Atlantic, he said, the North American Free Trade Agreement or NAFTA presently involving the US, Canada and Mexico and possibly other Latin American countries at a later stage, was another example of a trade bloc. -- more

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He said that as the EC and North America were important trading partners of Malaysia and other Asean countries, they were concerned that the growth of such exclusionist tendencies would create new currents that would artificially restrict free trade only within regulated boundaries.

Dr Mahathir explained that it was in view of this concern that Asean member countries had proposed the formation of the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC) that would bring them and other dynamic economies of East Asia together.

The countries would not be a trade bloc because all these countries depended on trade and economic relations with other parts of the world.

It was meant to strengthen the voice of free trade by augmenting the voice of small states through collective stands on common issues when negotiating internationally, he added. -- Bernama

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