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AFTA MUST BE CONFINED TO ASEAN MEMBERS, SAYS DR. MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 27<sup>93</sup> (Bernama) -- The Asean Free Trade Area (AFTA) must be confined to Asean countries and not those outside the grouping, Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad said today.

Thus, countries wishing to join AFTA must become a member of Asean first, he told newsmen after witnessing the signing ceremony for the joint-manufacturing of the Malaysian National Commercial Vehicle (MNCV) here.

Dr. Mahathir was asked to comment on Thailand Deputy Prime Minister Dr. Supachai Panithpakdi's proposal during an international trade and investment conference in Melbourne on Wednesday that Australia should consider joining the AFTA as well as the Malaysian-mooted East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC).

Dr. Mahathir said that Malaysia had never given a thought to such a proposal as it would like to focus on the implementation of AFTA first, which was expected to take 15 years to complete.

"AFTA belongs to Asean. How can a country outside Asean join AFTA ... unless it (Australia) becomes a member of Asean. Australia says it is an "Asian country" now ...," Dr. Mahathir said.

But as it is now, he said Asean is the Association of the South East Asian Nations. "So, I don't think geographically Australia is part of us," he said.

Yesterday, a top-ranking official from the Ministry of Trade and Industry said that Malaysia was unaware of such proposal as it had never been discussed at any of the grouping's (Asean) meeting. -- Bernama