

Dr M hopes EAEC can be set up as soon as possible

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. — Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today expressed hope that the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) could be established as soon as possible.

He also said that there was no problem for China, Japan and South Korea in seeking more time to hold further discussions before they decided on joining it.

However, he hoped the three countries were not asking for more time with a view to avoid making a decision on joining the EAEC.

He told this to reporters after launching the Veterinary Services Department

centenary celebrations at the Putra World Trade Centre here.

He was asked to comment on today's newspaper reports quoting Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi as saying that China, Japan and South Korea felt the EAEC had its merits but wanted more time to propose their own inputs on how the grouping should function.

Abdullah said China, Japan and South Korea were generally agreeable to the principles of the EAEC but did not want to hasten the implementation process since there were questions

on whether the grouping's activities would undermine other bodies such as the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec).

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had explained so many times the concept and objectives of the EAEC.

"We have no ulterior motive, but just to safeguard the free trade system," he said, adding that the EAEC was not a trade bloc.

The Prime Minister said intra-Asian trade had increased by 40 per cent and therefore China, Japan and South Korea should seriously view the efforts being made to safeguard East

Asian interests.

Asked whether he was disappointed with the request for more time by the three countries, he said:

"I am not disappointed, but there are certain quarters who purposely try to obstruct the establishment of the caucus".

Dr Mahathir said efforts to forge co-operation with four other countries in Southeast Asia, namely Myanmar, Laos, Cambodia and Vietnam, were a good move which could strengthen Asean and Asean decisions involving East Asia.