

23 NOV 1996

APEC: MAHATHIR IN FAVOUR OF MORE MEMBERS

By: Yong Soo Heong

MANILA, Nov 23 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says he is in favour of bringing more countries into the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.

He said: "If we keep people out, we cannot blame them if they don't understand what we (Apec members) are doing.

"And they will be suspicious of what we are doing if they are not able to contribute to what we are doing. Also, we will not be able to enlighten them on what is so good about the free market system and even democracy."

Fielding questions after his keynote address at the closing of the APEC Business Forum here, Dr Mahathir displayed sharp wit and humour with his answers which drew thunderous applause and sometimes laughter from the audience.

He said: "If Russia, Ecuador or Peru want to join, why not? We can explain to them and they can explain to us what they are, the stage that they are in and where we think they could improve or where we could improve."

Dwelling at length on the pressure placed by some countries on other countries to liberalise and open up markets, especially in the poorer developing countries, he said:

"We are told it will benefit us if the goods are cheap and our people can enjoy cheap products. But, you will remember that some years ago we all had access to a lot of cheap goods from Japan. And then somebody decided to push up the value of the yen by two and a half times!"

He said, previously, the average small farmer could afford to buy a pickup truck at a reasonable price but he would no longer be able to do so now because of the sharp appreciation of the yen.

On unfair trading practices, he cited the case of the textile and garments trade where developing countries were subject to quotas by the developed countries.

He said if certain countries wanted others to open up their markets, they themselves should do the same with their own markets.

Dr Mahathir said it made little sense if some developed countries said their markets were open to certain products which were not produced by others.

Turning to the financial sector, he said there was also imbalance in terms of the size of the players.

Some countries had suggested that it was good for countries to open up their financial sector because that would make the industry more efficient.

He added: "But then you have huge banks and we have tiny little banks. So even though we can go to your country and open up we don't have the money to open up.

"You have big banks that come to our country and open up your offices and branches. And you don't mind losing money in our country because you are making a lot of money elsewhere. If we lose our money in our own country, that's the end of us. So that is not a very equitable thing to do."

Asked about the extent of Malaysian support for the US-initiated Information Technology Act, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia could not really support it fully.

"We can support it to the extent it doesn't hurt us. We are told that it is good for us. But we would like to examine it. Once we were told that

things were good for us and we accepted but later found that they were not good for us. And it was too late. So give us time. That is all," he added.

He said that even in business, handicaps must be given, like in golf.

"Let us recognise that some people are less strong than other people," he said, adding that the issued should not be dismissed as political argument.

"These are very serious things for us Asian countries, especially the small ones."

Dr Mahathir said when some of the Apec economies were colonised, no one told them about liberalisation.

But once they achieved independence, the people who were considered unfit to govern their own countries were told to govern themselves as democratic nations, 100 percent, overnight and it was not possible, he added.

"I am just appealing to them (developed countries); that they also took a long time (to develop)."

Taking a swipe at those countries, Dr Mahathir said not so long ago during the days of Charles Dickens, some countries seemed to have started their development with child labour.

He added: "Of course, now they don't have (child labour) but they started off that way. We are not allowed to start that way. And we don't want to start that way.

"In fact, some of them started off with slaves. I would love to have slaves but I am not allowed! So please don't impose too many conditions on us."

On education, Dr Mahathir said it played a very important role in the development of any society.

And, on achieving success, he said it was the culture of the people that determined whether they would succeed or not.

"If the culture is not conducive to success, then they would not succeed," he added.

He said if working hard was part of one's culture, the chances of succeeding were better than that for people who believe that "working is a bore and you should relax as much as possible."

"And this you find in some of the developed countries where if the weather is fine, you stop work and sit in the sun. And then you complain why other people don't do the same," he added. -- BERNAMA

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