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Mahathir-ASEM

ASEM MUST CONTINUE ON AN INFORMAL BASIS, SAYS MAHATHIR

By: Michael Raj

BANGKOK, March 2 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today more can be achieved if the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) continues to be held on an informal basis rather than being institutionalised.

Institutionalisation would mean a permanent structure and slow down the action-oriented approach the 10 Asian and 15 European countries have agreed to adopt during the two-day landmark gathering, he said.

However, he could not say it would not be formalised because some countries might suggest that ASEM be formalised," he told a press conference at the conclusion of the two-day summit here.

Already, there were suggestions for meetings of ASEM finance ministers, economic ministers and even senior officials, all of which the host country could perhaps coordinate initially, he said.

Nevertheless, there could be calls by some countries for the establishment of a permanent secretariat at some stage, he added.

Dr Mahathir revealed that during the informal leaders gathering, the European delegation had insisted that ASEM be kept informal and that the relaxed atmosphere over the last two days had enabled them to talk frankly and achieved much more.

This was much better than "sitting around very dim conference tables with numerous officials behind them."

He felt ASEM was more successful than the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum because the former focussed on projects whereas the latter stressed on policies and structures.

For example, he said the proposal by leaders to look into a railway project linking Asia and Europe was implementable.

Asked about the expansion of ASEM membership and the possibility of including India and Pakistan, he said: "I don't think we should be exclusive but at some stage, East Asia needs to expand and include countries like India and Pakistan.

"...but the problem is that if you include these two countries, others will say you have to include Australia and New Zealand... that will put a new complexion to the whole thing."

Dr Mahathir said he felt that Australia and New Zealand were not part of Asia.

The priority now should be for ASEM to be more positive, he added.

He said the focus now should be on "deepening ASEM rather than its expansion ... we must first consolidate it so that it has a firm foundation to bring Asia and Europe closer together. -- BERNAMA

MR LDB