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Mahathir-EAEC

EAEC CAN MAKE EAST ASIA ENGINE FOR WORLD GROWTH

By: Abdul Muin Abdul Majid

BANGKOK, March 3 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today said East Asia will prosper and act as supplementary engines of growth for the rest of the world if the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) is given a free rein thereby truly propagating the free market system.

The prime minister said blocking the EAEC, being suspicious of it or diluting it with non-East Asians would only slow down the march towards East Asian prosperity, he said at a business dialogue here.

This might cause bitterness and would antagonise countries which really wanted to be friendly with the West, added Dr Mahathir in his address entitled "Shaping a Better World: Asia and Europe as Equal Partners".

Dr Mahathir was one of the leaders from 25 East Asian and Western European countries who attended the inaugural two-day Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) which ended in the Thai capital yesterday.

In gloves-off remarks, the prime minister said there was no real or meaningful equality espoused by the West and that control of the international media by the West had rendered independent thinking by others impossible.

Addressing about 150 business leaders, mainly from the East Asian region, he said the treatment accorded to the mooted EAEC was a classic case of double standards about equality with some East Asian countries being actually instructed by Western countries to reject this forum.

"What is one to make of this objection against Asian talking to each other when the objectors themselves have formed trade blocs, cartels and have taken unilateral action to block specific East Asian goods from their markets without even giving a fair hearing," he said.

He said the EAEC was an idea whose time had come which could speed the rebirth of an East Asia practising a free market system that would lay to rest the last vestiges of Communist and Socialist economic theories.

"If indeed the Europeans and the North Americans believe in the free market and the associated democratic system, the best thing they can do is to support the formation of the EAEC," he added.

He said the downfall of Socialism and Communism showed that the thinking of the Western intellectuals could be faulty and that they had prescribed the wrong remedies to the ailments of their societies, at a high cost in lives.

"If they could be wrong at such a great cost before, can they be not wrong again? Can we believe that the present Western thinkers are absolutely right? Is it not possible that they may be wrong again?" he asked.

Dr Mahathir said while the Eastern people were more concerned about spiritual matters, Westerners were more into materialistic things as embodied by Capitalism, Socialism and Communism.

"The basic idea is that if you have material well-being, you must be happy and if the material things are distributed equally, then all must be equally happy," he said.

Although the obsession with equality among the European and Western thinking was laudable, Dr Mahathir said it fell far short of justice and fairness when it came to other matters, including trade and international relations.

"A poor country may have equal rights to apply sanctions against a rich country but in fact it cannot do so. The equality is not real or

meaningful. It is merely a lip service," he added.

Dr Mahathir said equality as emphasised in trade was supposedly to create level playing fields for everyone, such as an absolutely unrestricted foreign direct investments policy.

To this, he said: "In fact, but for the right and the ability to regulate the economy in favour of locals in certain areas while allowing and even providing incentives for foreign investments in others, it is doubtful that Malaysia would be as prosperous as it is today."

He added that without these powers to give unequal treatment, it was likely that Malaysia would become another basket case dependent on aid and the generosity of others.

"A level playing field is fair when the contestants are of the same built but it is totally unfair when midgets are pitted against giants," Dr Mahathir added.

He said the powerful would resort to economic arm-twisting if they perceived that the weaker ones did not adhere to the unqualified equality mantra as stressed by them at various international trade fora.

"It does not occur to the rich and the powerful that equality can also be achieved by the lowering of their inflated wages, benefits and entitlements," he added.

The prime minister also said the ASEM summit was an example of near-equality as it took place on a level playing field and that the contestants were fairly evenly matched.

"When East Asia is fully reborn, it will not be a bitter East Asia wanting to get its own back on the nations which tried to delay or prevent its renaissance. It will remember those who helped and will contribute when required," he said. -- BERNAMA

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