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Keating-Mahathir

By: Neville D'Cruz

MELBOURNE, June 13 (Bernama) -- Former Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating yesterday described Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as a "formidable leader" whom he greatly admired.

Speaking at his first public appearance after his March 2 election defeat, Keating told a sell-out audience of 950 people at the University of New South Wales in Sydney that he wanted to set the record straight about his clash with Dr Mahathir which arose "not from personal animosity" but from a clash of visions.

"Dr Mahathir is a formidable leader who has transformed Malaysia in ways I greatly admire, but we had different visions of the region into the 21st century," Keating said.

"The driving force in his (Dr Mahathir's) vision was a strong pan-Asian nationalism which asserted that the time had come after centuries of colonial rule for Asia to take control of its own future.

"Mine has been shaped by the conviction that Australia's interest and the region's are best served by making the Asia Pacific the focus of our institution-building efforts because the dangers -- economic, social and strategic -- of creating a divide between the two sides of the Pacific were overwhelmingly greater than the advantages of an East Asia-only approach," he said.

He said Australia's exclusion from significant regional bodies was quite contrary to his government's view of Australian interests.

"It was also contrary to our view of the region's interest. I am convinced that Australia's active engagement in the region -- our energy, our creativity, our economic resources -- are an asset for the region as a whole," he said.

Keating proposed that the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum become a security dialogue body to meet the strategic needs of the Asia Pacific in the 21st century.

He said only Apec has the right membership, and the right institutional standing, to meet the security needs of the region.

"When you look at the potential for the further development of the institutional structures of the region it is clear that the only body which provides the coverage and the high level participation necessary to provide a forum for such (security) discussions is Apec." -- BERNAMA

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