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ASEM-Mahathir

MAHATHIR MORE CONFIDENT OF ASEM'S SUCCESS

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BANGKOK, March 2 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today expressed increased confidence in the success of the new Asia-Europe partnership for progress following the conclusion of the first summit meeting between heads of government from the two regions.

This was because the inaugural Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) which ended here earlier had managed to generate ideas "which are implementable", the Prime Minister told a news conference at the Queen Sirikit National Convention Centre, venue of the two-day ASEM.

He contrasted this with the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum, which he said tended to focus more on policies than projects.

He cited as an example ASEM's proposal to further develop the Singapore to Kunming rail project to extend the connection to Beijing and then westward via the Trans-Siberia railway to Europe.

With APEC, such an idea could only be feasible by tunnelling under the Pacific Ocean, he said to laughter at the crowded news conference which had to be shifted to a larger room from an initial 100-seat facility to cope with the demand from journalists, especially the West, for tickets to the event which were quickly snapped up.

Dr Mahathir said he was also encouraged by the tone and atmosphere of discussion at the historic gathering of leaders from two of the three most important economic regions of the world -- Western Europe and East Asia.

The summit was attended by leaders of 10 Asian countries comprising the Asean seven plus China, Japan and South Korea and the 15-member European Union (EU).

He said the European leaders had openly admitted that East Asia was growing faster than Europe and that Asians knew more about Europe than vice-versa.

This in turn, he said, had led to the unanimous adoption of an ASEM university project in Europe and in Asia to promote knowledge about each other's regions and to promote the networking which could yield future leaders knowledgeable about and having contacts in the other region.

As for the summit's theme "A new comprehensive partnership for greater growth" based on equality and mutual respect, Dr Mahathir said he had detected much less patronising on the part of the European leaders in dealing with their Asian counterparts, many of them representing former colonies, although a hint of it remained.

He was also happy to note that, contrary to wide speculation, the European leaders had refrained from raising contentious issues during the ASEM. This had contributed to the good atmosphere at the summit, he said.

Asked for his reaction to a European request for a level playing field for investment in Asia, Dr Mahathir said there should not be any conditionalities when it comes to foreign investment because there is a tendency to link investment with other matters.

The level playing field will only be fair if the players were of the same size otherwise the weaker player must be given some handicap.

Asked about a Philippine proposal for security issues to be taken up by ASEM, he said the summit had focussed more on trade and cultural relations to bring the two regions closer together and to foster better mutual understanding.

He said there had not been very much interest in security matters, whether on the tension across the Taiwan Straits or on the Korean peninsula

or even the Spratlys.

Regarding Malaysia's balance of payments deficit, Dr Mahathir reiterated that it was not a problem which could not be resolved as it involved mainly Malaysia's huge import bill for capital and intermediate goods, most of it from Japan.

The solution, he added, was for Malaysia to export more and in some bilateral discussions, he had mentioned to some European leaders the need for their countries to import more from Malaysia.

Asked about the culture gap between the Europeans and Asians, Dr Mahathir conceded that there were differences in the value systems of the two sides and it would take time for the two regions to achieve a clear understanding of each other's values.

He ended the news conference by remarking that in the final analysis "Asian values are universal values and European values are European values". -- Bernama

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