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Mahathir-Myanmar

NOT FOR OTHERS TO DETERMINE ASEAN'S STAND, SAYS DR MAHATHIR

JAKARTA, Nov 30 (Bernama) -- Other countries have no right to determine the stand which should be taken by Asean over the question of its membership, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today.

"The question of other countries being unhappy or of the view that Asean should not accept certain parties is not their right.

"We are no longer colonies of foreign countries. We make our decision on our own, as independent nations," he said at a news conference after the one-day Asean Informal Summit, here.

Dr Mahathir was asked on the decision of Asean leaders to admit Myanmar as a member inspite of pressures from European countries and the United States.

The leaders agreed that Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar be admitted as Asean members simultaneously and the actual timing of their admission would be announced in due time.

Asked how Asean could assure European countries and the United States not to interfere in the domestic affairs of Myanmar, Dr Mahathir said Asean was not in the business of assuring European countries or America.

"We are in the business of assuring ourselves and if we are assured ourselves, that's enough," he said.

Asked if it was possible for Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar to join Asean next year, Dr Mahathir said the important thing was that the three countries would be joining together.

"The actual timing has not been fixed ... that is left to your imagination," he said. Asean will celebrate its 30th anniversary next year in Malaysia.

Asked why the countries must join together when the conditions in each of them were said to be different, Dr Mahathir said as far as Asean was concerned there was no difference.

"All the criteria has been or will be met by all the three countries. Therefore, there is no reason why they should not be admitted together," he said.

Asked if the decision on the three countries joining Asean together could be interpreted as either slowing down or acceleratng Myanmar's entry into Asean, Dr Mahathir said it was a matter of opinion.

"It could be regarded as a slowing down the admission of Laos and Cambodia or it can be interpreted as the speeding up the integration of Myanmar into the Asean grouping ... as far as we are concerned the most important thing is that all three will be admitted together," he said.

Laos and Cambodia have been expected to join Asean next year and Myanmar has indicated that it would like to do so at the same time.

On Asean's policy of constructive engagement with Myanmar, Dr Mahathir said it has brought changes in Myanmar and should be continued.

"It is now much more open. It is now willing to have foreign direct investments. It has contacts with Asean where before it was isolationist," said Dr Mahathir who had met Myanmar's State Law Order and Restoration Council (Slorc) chairman Than Shwe on the sidelines of the informal summit yesterday.

Than Shwe and the leaders of Cambodia and Laos were invited for the inaugural summit. Malaysia will host the informal summit next year.

On the just-ended informal summit, Dr Mahathir said the meeting had been fruitful.

"I feel very good indeed about this meeting except that some other people who are not in the meeting feel very unhappy that we did not sit down and discuss Myanmar all the time," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the meeting discussed other things as well which were constructive and beneficial to the Asean countries. -- BERNAMA

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