

26 MAR 1996

Mahathir-immigration

ODD TO REJECT ASIANS WHILE WANTING TO BE CLOSE TO ASIA, NZ TOLD

By: Syed Jamil Jaafar

WELLINGTON, March 26 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today it is up to New Zealand to decide on its immigration policy but it would seem odd for the country to reject Asian immigrants and at the same time say it wants to be close to Asia.

"It would sound like discrimination," he said in response to a question at a press conference here on New Zealand's efforts for greater engagement with Asia and the opposition from certain quarters here to increased Asian immigration.

The press conference was jointly held by Dr Mahathir and his New Zealand counterpart Jim Bolger after the two leaders witnessed the signing of four bilateral agreements at Parliament House.

"New Zealand has played host to many Asians in the past and it is up to her to decide whether to take in more Asians or Europeans but of course this will be noted by the Asian countries because we feel that New Zealand is interested in being more Asian, almost as much as Australia, I think," he said.

Dr Mahathir said he did not think New Zealanders as a whole would want to reject Asian immigrants merely because they are Asian.

"Immigrants coming into any country ... if they can contribute I think should be accepted. That is our view in Malaysia and we have allowed the naturalisation of many immigrants," he said.

New Zealand, which has a land area of 270,000 sq km, has a population of only 3.64 million comprising Europeans (79.5 per cent), Maori (13 per cent), Pacific Island Polynesians (5 per cent) and Asians and others (2.5 per cent).

Dr Mahathir said that more and more New Zealand would be identified with this part of the world rather than Europe.

In any case Europe had become more Eurocentric and less interested in historical ties than in geographical links.

"So, whether you like it or not, you are here," said Dr Mahathir, to which Bolger responded: "We are and we're delighted to be here, Datuk Seri."

Dr Mahathir also answered questions on the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC), tension between China and Taiwan, Malaysia's balance of payments deficit and the country's tough dadah laws.

He said that for the EAEC to be realised, efforts had to be made to overcome the suspicions some countries had about the proposal.

Dr Mahathir said he would be very happy if New Zealand had no objections to the EAEC.

"That's all. I am not asking for support," he said.

Bolger responded that as far as New Zealand was concerned, it had no problem with countries from one region "meeting, caucusing and discussing."

"That's why we have taken a low-key approach to the apprehensions expressed by some countries about the EAEC. I anticipate the EAEC will make progress," he said.

On China, Dr Mahathir said he did not think that China's attitude towards Taiwan would be similar to its attitude when it comes to the question of the Spratly Islands claim or any other claims in East Asia.

"What is happening between Taiwan and China is that China regards this as a wholly domestic thing and Taiwan itself admits it is part of China," he said.

"But if Taiwan's leaders choose to provoke the Chinese government, then you can get a lot of tension and acts being carried out in order to impress upon the Taiwanese the futility of their desire to become an independent country.

"This is entirely between China and Taiwan. I don't think we should take that as an indicator that China is an aggressive nation and will solve all problems through military means.

"In so far as the Spratly claim is concerned, China has said they are prepared to sit down and negotiate on a multilateral basis," Dr Mahathir said.

Malaysia and China are among the claimants to all or some of the cluster of islands in the South China Sea. -- Bernama

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