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Mahathir-Asia

PM OUTLINES CHALLENGES IN THE WAY OF AN ASIAN RENAISSANCE

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 15 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today spoke of three basic challenges faced by Asia in achieving what he referred to as an Asian Renaissance.

The challenges are domestic reform and revolution, regional friendship and prosperity, and contributing to a better, more just and more productive new world order.

"Asia has done well so far but there is no time for euphoria. There must be no resting on laurels. We must understand that we have only just begun," he said at the opening of the 1996 Regional Conference of Harvard Clubs of Asia here.

"It is even useful to minimise our own accomplishments if we want to avoid irritating those who fear the so-called 'Asian challenge', those who have lost confidence in their own ability to compete, those societies which know that in order to meet the world head on they will need to change their ways but are either unwilling or unable to do so," he said.

Stressing that domestic challenge is, perhaps, by far the most important, Dr Mahathir said that for Asia to grow and prosper it must accept and manage reform and revolution in individual Asian countries.

"What are the key areas for domestic reform and revolution? The exact priorities are, of course, different in different Asian societies," he said.

"Although we have made political progress, many of us still need to discard loyalty to old and clearly impractical ideologies.

"We have to make up our minds ourselves, without any push by others. But the outdated economic theories which had resulted in the formulation of these ideologies have been proven wrong. If we accept new economic models, then we must adjust our politics to suit them," he said.

For many, he said, the need is for fundamental reform. For some, the need is for "kaizen", constant improvement, constant fine-tuning, as their societies continue to be dramatically transformed.

"In some societies in the Western world, there is the belief that 'if it ain't broken, don't fix it.' In all our societies, we must bend to the kaizen principle, 'if it isn't perfect, perfect it'," he said.

He said Asian countries must now lay the foundations for equally tremendous economic results for the future after having done remarkably well in the past.

"And we cannot do this without domestic economic reforms and continued societal revolution," he said.

What was needed was to mount a massive productivity push and to move their economic systems to new levels of productivity performance, he said.

On the second challenge, he said Asia needs "to escape the mindset dictated in other continents", many of whom might not have a similar interest in our peace and our friendship.

"It is touching how so many of us in Asia seem to assume that others can have a greater interest in the welfare of Asia than Asians themselves," he added.

The real task of regional statesmanship lies in building a warm and cooperative peace in East Asia initially, and in the rest of Asia eventually, he said.

"In trying to do this, we can encourage and support the constructive assistance of our friends. But the East Asian peace that we must build must

be built largely by us on the basis of non-military balances and alliances," he said.

He said now is the most opportune time to launch the East Asian peace "when tensions are at their ebb, when nations are relaxed, when peace is already there".

The conditions in Southeast Asia in the mid-Sixties when Asean was launched were much less propitious than are the conditions prevailing in East Asia today, he said.

"I believe it is time for East Asia to launch a similar act of regional statesmanship," he added.

The East Asian prosperity must allow for the constructive contribution of all states, big and small, for all Asian countries have shown a capacity for level-headedness, irrespective of size and situation, he said.

Saying East Asia must be strongly wedded to the principle of "open regionalism", he believed that if they cooperate on issues of trade, it would result in reducing the barriers not only between them but the outside world.

On the third challenge, he said Asia must rise and make a greater contribution to the global commonwealth of man.

"In order to do this, Asia must put its own house in order. Asia must empower itself. Asia must be worthy of leadership. And Asia must rise to the challenge of contribution," he said.

Dr Mahathir said many have spent a great deal of their time throwing cold water on the very idea that Asia is on the rise and that a resurgent Asia will see the return of history -- to the days when Asia contributed its fair share to modernity and to human civilisation.

"Cold water has its uses. It is necessary for those of us whose heads are inordinately large. But in this phase of history, we have confounded the Asia-sceptics. May we continue to confound them and their cynicism," he said. -- BERNAMA

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