

26 AUG 1996

Mahathir-Asia

THE ASIAN CENTURY IS A MYTH, SAYS DR MAHATHIR

By: Zainoor Sulaiman

BEIJING, Aug 26 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today talk about the Asian Century is a myth and that he sees the 21st century as a World Century when the globe takes precedence over the narrow interest of continents and nations.

Saying that it's just not in keeping with the times, the Prime Minister said what is needed is "to stop making a bogey of Asian countries."

"Let us forget this Asian Century myth and settle down to make the World Trade Organisation (WTO) a great organisation that will benefit rich and poor alike; an organisation dedicated to international interdependence and friendship, free of arm-twisting and big-power dominance," he said.

"The 21st century will see a different world, a world so shrunken that we cannot even recognise borders anymore," he said in his keynote address at the opening of the "Malaysia-China Partnership: The Beijing Dialogue" at the China World Hotel here. A total of 700 people, including 250 Malaysian businessmen, are attending the two-day dialogue.

Speaking on the theme "The Asia Century: A Malaysian Perspective", Dr Mahathir said the frame of mind of a lot of people regarding the Asian Century was not healthy.

The likelihood of Asia dominating or one Asian nation dominating the world was actually a fanciful dream, he said.

The more likely scenario is a world with many economic powers -- Asian, European and American -- in the East and the West, acting as locomotives of growth for the rest of the world.

"They will invest in the poor countries and they will be the markets for the products of the poor countries, products which will be manufactured by their own subsidiaries," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the century of the world would not happen with the continued talk of the Asian Century, especially when fears were openly expressed over the possibility that some Asian nations might become powerful.

"We should downplay this Asian Century thing but play up the Century of the world, the century when the world comes together, to build greater prosperity for everyone," he said.

The Prime Minister said Europe and America served as the engine of growth for Japan, South Korea, Taiwan and Singapore and now the so-called tigers of Southeast Asia.

Asians, no matter how rich they might be, would not forsake non-Asian countries and continents, he said. "If they smell money, they will follow their noses."

The Asians are against the formation of trade blocs and believe in open regionalism but the West did not seem to trust them, to take them at their words.

Perhaps the West had reasons for doubting the words of the Asians because some Asian countries had always been unwilling to open up their markets while those who said they were, created all kinds of obstacles, non-tariff barriers against trade, he said.

Dr Mahathir said the West was justified in not trusting the Asians but questioned whether it was fair to "tar all the Asians with the same brush" since some Asian countries had been open all the time and some were obviously opening up now.

But on the other hand the West had taken measures to obstruct Asian

products when they realised that their monopoly of the manufacturing industry had been broken when more and more low-priced but high quality Asian goods were capturing their markets.

"If only ethnic Europeans can overcome this prejudice, trade and other intercourse between Asian countries and the ethnic Europeans of Europe and America would get bigger and healthier," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia believed that by prospering its neighbour it would prosper also.

On a grander scale, if the West would help Asia to prosper, they would prosper too and indeed if Asia and the West prosper, then the whole world will prosper, including Africa and Latin America.

He said while some countries in Asia would emerge as great economic powers, most would be mediocre or actually poor but "just because a few will be rich and presumably powerful, does not mean that Asia would be powerful."

The average Asian per capita would remain very low by comparison at least, if not in absolute terms, and the situation would not be deserving the appellation, the Asian Century, he said.

"Let us forget this ego massaging theme, the Asian Century... Let us not make a bogey of it.."

"If China becomes, by sheer weight of numbers, the world's greatest economic entity, it will still not become the Middle Kingdom again. There will be no Silk Road...no Genghiz Khan...no Tartar of Mongol hordes..," he said.

With the exception of Japan, Asians would continue to buy European technology and apply it to their business and the world would be richer for it.

Dr Mahathir envisaged that all countries would have multiracial population like Malaysia as the people were going to be more and more mobile.

"So far we have seen only African, Arab and Asian migration to European countries...the day will certainly come when Europeans will migrate and settle in Asian and African countries."

The cross fertilisation would change the character of Asia as it would change Europe and America, he added. -- BERNAMA

ZS YBY