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Mahathir-Asia

TIME FOR EAST ASIAN REGIONAL STATESMANSHIP, SAYS MAHATHIR

By: Tham Choy Lin

TOKYO, May 17 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today called on East Asia to set itself on the road to true peace and friendship and move forward together with confidence.

The Prime Minister said it was now time to launch an East Asian act of regional statesmanship and it should begin with its leaders meeting over a host of issues on peace, friendship, common prosperity and collective economic dynamism.

"The best way forward in creating the enduring, warm and cooperative peace we want is to advance on all fronts. We must act unilaterally, whenever possible, to reduce tension, to solve conflicts, to generate confidence," he said at a high-profile international conference on the Future of Asia organised by Japan's leading business newspaper, Nihon Keizai Shimbun.

"Let us not forget the old Arabian saying that the whole road is clean if everyone sweeps the front of his house," added Dr Mahathir in his presentation entitled "Towards A Stable Asia."

He said if East Asia can achieve that, it would bring peace and stability to half of Asia and then it can focus on making the entire continent stable and prosperous.

He said while Asia had already achieved a remarkable level of stability, there was no reason for complacency because the stability was often shaky and in the past 50 years, East Asia had been the most turbulent region in the world with the Korean and Vietnam wars.

Dr Mahathir listed three central challenges which he described as "absolutely critical" that would confront Asia in the decade to come.

Apart from establishing warm and enduring peace in East Asia, the other two are to ensure a prosperous and economically dynamic region and the third, to ensure social justice at home, he told an audience that included Philippine President Fidel Ramos and Singaporean Deputy Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong.

Dr Mahathir said while countries need to be sufficiently equipped for defence, warm and enduring peace cannot be built on creating alliances or the balance of military power approach which would only have weapons manufacturers rubbing their hands in glee.

Military balancing was a ruinous process that led to bankrupt economies, impoverished societies and a barren and cold peace, he added.

Dr Mahathir said: "Why should we settle for a barren and cold peace? Especially when there is a historic opportunity to put history behind us and to build a warm and cooperative peace. To live in the company and in the comfort of good neighbours."

He paid tribute to Asean for establishing peaceful conduct and good citizenship in Southeast Asia and has since emerged as the core of the Asean Regional Forum and the Asia-Europe Meeting which was held for the first time this year.

Dr Mahathir said East Asian countries must continue with its policy to help each other prosper as global prosperity was threatened by the rise of new mercantilism and new protectionism.

He said he was greatly encouraged by the process that was already in place in the region through the constant consultations among Asean foreign and economic ministers as well as with their counterparts from China, Japan and South Korea.

China, Japan, South Korea and the seven Asean member countries will be attending an inaugural meeting in Kuala Lumpur to develop the Mekong basin in Indochina and the leaders of the three countries have been invited for the informal Asean leaders summit in Jakarta in December.

Dr Mahathir said that when he looked back into the history of the East Asia Economic Grouping (EAEG) that was later changed to East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC), he was reminded of Shakespeare's line that a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

The EAEC was mooted by Malaysia but it was changed to EAEC after opposition from the United States which until today is against the loose forum because it did not qualify to be a member geographically.

The Prime Minister said there had been a deliberate attempt to minimise Asia's accomplishments over the last generation.

This came in the form of intense marketing of the "threats in East Asia" and to throw cold water on the entire East Asian "miracle" as if the accomplishments were achieved by magic rather than the hard work and sweat of its people.

"Cold water has its uses. It is particularly useful for those of us whose heads are too big for their bodies," he said.

Dr Mahathir said East Asia should not be cornered into pessimism, dependence or loss of confidence.

"We have every reason to be confident. Japan, like the rest of us, has every reason for confidence. Let us move forward together," he said.

Ramos and Lee also presented papers at the two-day conference which began yesterday. Other speakers include Japanese Foreign Minister Yukihiko Ikeda and US assistant secretary for East Asian and Pacific affairs, Winston Lord. -- BERNAMA

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