

28/03/1997

A more equitable world lies in Asian hands: PM

Hardev Kaur in Tokyo

TOKYO, Thurs: The future of Asia and of a more equitable and just world lies in Asian hands. Asians must speak up and provide the counter balance if "Asia wants to enjoy peace and prosperity in the next century" and ensure a world in which the weak and the strong can co-exist in peace and prosperity.

But if Asians continue to be passive, fragmented and timidly defensive, they will continue as they are now. They must push their own arguments in the light of their own experience, past and present. "It can do a lot of good. It cannot do much harm," Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

Making an impassioned plea for Asians to decide their own destiny, the Prime Minister stressed that "Asia must be willing to confront Europeans across the table now if it wants to avoid confronting them in other arenas later".

In this, Japan which is by far the most advanced Asian nation and the "first among equals", is well placed to lead and should play its rightful role in world affairs. It should set a good example for Asia by taking issues of concern to Asian countries.

"It should cease to consider itself a Western developed nation in the East. Japan has the credibility to lead, not towards Asian domination in an Asian century, but towards a more equitable world community in the Century of the World which is dawning upon us," Dr Mahathir said.

So far, Asia has refused to do anything in concert. They worry that Europeans on both sides of the Atlantic may not like it. At all costs, they must not annoy the Europeans. Even if the Europeans are obviously wrong, the view appears to be that they should not be angered by telling them they could be wrong.

Stressing that he did not advocate military confrontation, Dr Mahathir said a balance in terms of military might "is wasteful and unproductive", adding that Asians can prevail simply by arguing their case together to counter the tendency of the Europeans to impose their systems and their will on the world.

If Asia decides to accept continued European domination of the world, then a rapidly inequitable and oppressive atmosphere will build up which must in the end be damaging to Asia if not to the whole world.

However, if Asia decides to play a meaningful role in world affairs, to counter and correct wrong attitudes and the international policies of the Europeans, then there will be hope for a more just world, a more equitable world.

Asia, which played a significant role in the past in shaping the cultures, religions and politics of the world, can do the same again - not through wars but through balancing the pressures of the Europeans. Asians can succeed if they "have the courage of their conviction and the will to try".

However, the problem with Asians, according to Dr Mahathir is that they are "passive, fragmented and timidly defensive". Asians who are the only people capable of balancing European influence, are divided and unwilling to play a meaningful role in world affairs, he argued.

Delivering a speech on "The Future of Asia and the Role of Japan: Challenges of the 21st Century to Youth" at the Waseda University here, he said if Asians continue to be as they are now, "then the role of Asians in

the next century will not be any different from their present role. And in that case they deserve to be dominated by the Europeans in an inequitable and an unjust world".

While advocating and stressing the need for Asia to play a "balancing role", the Prime Minister said it is not the same as "trying to dominate". Even a strong Asia cannot dominate the world in the same sense as the Europeans on both sides of the Atlantic dominated the world for over four centuries.

"The concept of domination and hegemony in the old sense, is outdated and silly," Dr Mahathir said, adding that "it is unfortunate, however, that the Europeans are still clinging to this idea and postulating all kinds of possible hegemonic threats by Asia".

Europeans have continued to impose their will on Asians. Divided and uncoordinated, the emerging economies of Asia have so far been unable to effectively have a say in the political and economic affairs of their own economies and certainly not the world.

Addressing the creme de la creme of students, Dr Mahathir warned that if the Europeans are allowed to continue as they have been and if the European views are allowed to continue and prevail, even if they have been proven to be wrong on numerous occasions, then there will be a very heavy price to pay for the wrong political, economic systems of the Europeans.

Tensions will rise, threats will be hurled and unpleasant incidents will colour the relations between East and West. One day, he added, someone might do something stupid and economic pursuits will be replaced with political and even military confrontations.

While admitting that all this seems rather pessimistic, he hastened to add that "all these things can happen. They can happen because the only people who can do something to stop it will not act. The only people are the Asians, the countries of Asia, especially East Asia".

Asians can prevail, according to Dr Mahathir, simply by arguing their case together to counter the tendency of the Europeans to impose their systems and their will on the world. Europeans have been wrong in the past and they could be again about their ideology, their political systems and their economic creed. Asians have to prevail now before the overbearing ways of the Europeans lead to bitterness and tensions.

Dr Mahathir said Asia will grow and develop in the coming years and "short of a nuclear war exploding, there can be no stopping the emergence of East Asia as an economic powerhouse of the same stature as the European Union or Nafta in the 21st century."

While some probably think that a strong Asia will want to dominate the world, Dr Mahathir argued that Asian cannot dominate the world in the sense the Europeans on both sides of the Atlantic dominated the world for centuries. They still continue their dominance through dictating the terms of trade, the systems of government and the whole value system of world including human rights and environmental protection.

"They are still at it because no one seems capable or willing to counter them. The Asians, the only people capable of balancing European influence, are divided and unwilling to play a meaningful role in world affairs."

If Asians, particularly East Asians, have a better sense of responsibility, they will undertake the task, Dr Mahathir said. He nevertheless stressed that Asia cannot dominate the world. There cannot be an Asian century "but a more cohesive Asia can provide the balance which will contribute towards the creation of a more equitable world.

Touching on China, he said due to its sheer size alone, China must become a major economic power in the region. But in economic terms, China will not be as big as the rest of East Asia. Dr Mahathir said an antagonistic stand towards China will not be necessary, adding that this

will "actually be counter-productive".

On the other hand, cooperation with China, increasing understanding and diminishing the possibility of conflicts and confrontations in East Asia will by extension contribute towards building a peaceful and more equitable world.

(END)