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Abdullah's hopes for Asean

A POIGNANT wish list peppered Foreign Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's opening address when he spoke about the challenges Asean faces to sustain its dynamism and track record in the next millennium.

"I would like to wish that when Asean celebrates its 60th anniversary, every child in the Asean region will have a school to go to and be able to read and write."

"I would like to imagine that disease and hunger have become unknown.

"I would like to hope that this dynamic group of countries would no longer have any disputes between them," he said at the start of the 30th session of the Asean Ministerial Meeting which was earlier opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"Asean member states, both old and new, must resolve that 30 years from now, existing problems between them should disappear and new ones prevented from emerging.

"Asean will eschew any inclination to get short-term gains at the expense of its fellow members. Prosperity needs to be shared by all members and efforts must be made to assist the less developed to realise fully their economic potentials."

Abdullah said he would also like to see a region fully at ease with information technology and exploiting to the fullest all the potential that technology had to offer.

"Most of all, I hope to see an Asean region maintaining its polite culture and traditions in the conduct of relations with one another.

"Continued economic prosperity and political stability can only be achieved by intent and design. This responsibility we cannot delegate to others, but shoulder it ourselves," he said.

Abdullah said Asean's responsibility now was to chart a course to ensure its place as the pre-eminent organisation in the region, respected both at home and abroad.

Faced by issues relating to the information age, globalisation and intensified regionalism, he said: "We have done well so far, but success and prosperity often breed complacency."

He said the annual meeting was also a time for reflection "of our past achievements (and) of our shortcomings."

"We have witnessed a massive transformation in the economies of member-states and we can boast of some of the highest growth rates in the world.

"Our people have shown they have the capacity to absorb the latest technology and our workers' diligence has been singled out as one of the factors that attracts increasing numbers of foreign investors and manufacturers to our shores."

He said Asean should dismiss pessimistic views of the grouping's future, in which economic competition due to globalisation is seen as creating tension and discord among members to eventually weaken the Asean spirit.

He said he did not accept such pessimism, and added that it was perfectly legitimate for Asean countries to shape their economies in a manner which brought them the greatest benefit.

"There has always been healthy competition among us in search of markets for our products. Admittedly, globalisation may distract us, but I sincerely believe none of us would want to sacrifice what we have built in Asean for some lucrative advantage," he said.

On Laos and Myanmar, he said he would be less than candid if he did not

express Malaysia's own satisfaction to have the admission of both countries into Asean coinciding with its hosting of the AMM in Kuala Lumpur.

But, he added: "The events of the past few months have tested the very principles Asean has lived with. The decision to admit Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar has not been an easy one."

"Likewise, our later decision to postpone Cambodia's admission has not been taken lightly.

"Asean has been instrumental in promoting the close co-operation amongst its members. But Asean also demands that its members observe and fulfil certain obligations."

On Asean's dealings with the outside world, Abdullah said the recent unity to resist attempts to insert non-tariff conditionalities in the World Trade Organisation agreement was one such example.

"I may say, if we had acted singly, none of us would have made much of an impact in the face of the strong pressures and enormous influence of the economic super powers."

Abdullah also said the Asean Regional Forum, as the avenue for security dialogue, had great prospects of developing into a meaningful forum for dealing with such issues in the Asia-Pacific region.

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