

13 DEC 1997

Mahathir-Dialogue

ASEAN LEADERS TO CONCENTRATE ON CURRENT ECONOMIC PROBLEMS

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 13 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today expressed confidence that Asean will be one of the strongest economic entities in the world in future but for now it has to concentrate on the present difficult situation arising from currency and share market problems.

Referring to the second Asean Informal Summit which starts here on Monday he said "the leaders' meeting will of course discuss the future but I am afraid that it is very difficult to concentrate on the future when the present is so painful."

Dr Mahathir was answering questions at a dialogue session after opening the "Private Sector Salute to Asean" held in conjunction with the summit here.

The Prime Minister said Asean had what it took to succeed including regional peace, close cooperation among member countries and the willingness to talk to each other to settle differences.

"The chances of Asean becoming a very dynamic region is very good and I hope in 10 years time we will be just that," he said.

On his suggestion that a "Buy Asean" policy be promoted as a way to recover from the regional economic setbacks, he said he did not see any harm in proposing the idea to his other Asean colleagues during the summit. Dr Mahathir raised the idea during his opening speech at the forum.

When asked whether Malaysia would continue to resist aid from the International Monetary Fund (IMF), he said he could not tell for sure.

"Because if we say so it may incur displeasure and may result in us being forced to go down on our knees and beg for help," he said.

Despite repeated questions from the floor, the Prime Minister refused to pin-point those responsible for the region's economic problem.

He said, "I'm not allowed to blame anybody except ourselves. There are certain things that you must not say."

Dr Mahathir said unless the root cause of the problems was recognised and corrected, any proposed answer to solve them would not be effective.

He also said Malaysia would continue to welcome genuine foreign direct investments to the country.

"We still welcome those people who come in to do serious long-term business," he said. -- BERNAMA

MAM/AD AAM