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Mahathir-Asean

ASEAN TO RESOLVE PROBLEM IN OWN WAY AND TIME, SAYS PM

KUALA LUMPUR, July 24 (Bernama) -- Asean must resist and reject attempts at coercion and resolve its problem in "our own way and in our own time", said Malaysia's Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"No one, but no one should assume that only they will know the solutions to all problems. They have failed far too often for us to be convinced that only they know what is right and what is wrong," he said when opening the 30th Asean Ministerial Meeting here today.

Dr Mahathir said the world should conclude that membership of Asean would have a steadying influence on domestic politics and would help the progress of member countries.

In his usual direct-hitting style, Dr Mahathir said it was regrettable that there were those who did not see the obvious and instead encouraged Asean to pass judgment, deny membership and apply pressure on potential candidate so as to force the country to remain poor and therefore unstable.

"They are not a part of the Asean way. We will resolve our problem in our own way and in our own time," he said, in an obvious reference to criticisms especially from the West, in particular the United States, against Asean's admission of Myanmar as a full member yesterday.

Dr Mahathir described the AMM here as a "milestone" in the history of regional cooperation. The meeting takes place ahead of Asean's 30th anniversary on Aug 8.

"We believe in strength through unity. We reject exclusivity. We suffered in a bipolar world. We know that alone we each will suffer," said Dr Mahathir, adding that only by being together can Asean maintain and benefit from its hard-won independence.

Extending his congratulations to Myanmar and Laos, which joined Asean yesterday, Dr Mahathir said while there is cause to celebrate, the difficulties faced by South East Asian countries in their early attempts to form the regional forum in 1967 after two false starts should not be forgotten.

"It was political necessity rather than economic imperative which brought these countries together. But almost immediately there was talk about these countries emulating the European Economic Community by becoming a trade bloc," he said.

An Asean economic bloc then would have been quite meaningless because of the very low level of economic development and overlapping territorial claims remained to strain relations between the countries, he said.

However, he said, pragmatism prevailed and Asean countries continue to meet even though bilateral relations between certain members were strained.

"To this day, the claims remain but they have not prevented Asean from developing into a regional forum with credibility in the world's economic, social and political affairs," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Asean's accomplishments were even more remarkable considering that not so long ago, there were wars and conflicts in the region and within many of the Asean countries.

He said Asean's ultimate defence is not being a military bloc but in its own stability, economic strength and unity.

"If we have problems with non-Asean countries, we will together seek a solution through negotiations using our unit as a lever," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that while Asean appreciated offers of defence assistance, the question remains whether the promised help was forthcoming

when so many countries were being abandoned to their fate as soon as they were in trouble.

"We know we will be left to face the problem and to pay the cost with our lives and wealth. In the final analysis, we can rely on ourselves," he said.

Dr Mahathir said those who talk of military conquests and colonial territories were living in the past and territorial acquisition was no longer worthwhile in a world dedicated to economic growth through a free market system.

"Economic prosperity is really the answer to our security problems because with prosperity, Asean will be taken seriously and its views respected," he said.

Military strength may inspire fear and a costly arms race that only benefited weapons manufacturers but on the other hand, economic prosperity inspired respect at a much lower cost and the benefits remained, he added.

Asean now groups Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, Brunei, the Philippines, Vietnam, Laos and Myanmar. -- BERNAMA

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