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Asean: Unity is strength

DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's strong speech when opening the momentous 30th Asean Ministerial Meeting in Petaling Jaya on Thursday sets the pace for the enlarged grouping's direction into the next millennium.

Malaysia as chairman of the Asean Standing Committee sees nothing more vital in the grouping's effort to forge ahead than cohesion and solidarity. The Prime Minister drives home the point in declaring: "We believe in strength through unity. We reject exclusivity...We know that alone we each will suffer. Only through being together can we maintain and benefit from the hard-won independence." Numbers do count. With half a billion people in the nine Asean member nations and their combined resources, Asean is indisputably one of the world's strongest regional groupings.

Simultaneously, Dr Mahathir, in his usual style of not mincing words, is also sending a firm message to Asean's detractors and those who want to dominate that the grouping will not be cowed and dictated to. Any attempt at coercion will be met with unprecedented resistance. The admission of Myanmar along with Laos on Wednesday is a clear signal to outsiders of Asean's resolve to handle issues in its own way and in its own time.

Economic strength and self-reliance are crucial to Asean's continued vitality and viability. The Malaysian leader believes that economic prosperity is "really the answer to our security problems because with prosperity, Asean will be taken seriously and its views respected." Stressing the need to focus on economic development and the peoples' well-being, Dr Mahathir slammed anew those out to undermine the economies of Southeast Asian nations by destabilising their currencies. In their crusade for open societies, he said "rogue speculators and anarchists" are out to destroy weak countries to force them to submit to the dictatorship of international manipulators. This makes nonsense of the developed nations' call for countries to open up, to totally liberalise trade and commerce.

In the face of the speculative attacks on the region's currencies, it is imperative for Asean countries to step up co-operation to counter this serious challenge. If necessary, laws must be formulated to thwart the perpetrators bent on profiteering and achieving their selfish designs. Asean's concerted effort, Japan's pledge that it will keep close contact with other Asian economies for the stability of the currency markets and the Asia-Pacific central bankers' meeting in Shanghai this week on the currency crisis are encouraging moves towards fending off the speculators. But we know only too well that these speculators will come back once they see any sign they can exploit. The only way is for Asean member nations to be vigilant, work together, stay together and explore all ways to protect themselves. In the final analysis, it is only prudent for Asean to be self-reliant for outsiders can leave us in the lurch as has been proven time and time again.

The future is indeed bright for Asean member countries and only they themselves can make or break it. As Dr Mahathir so aptly sums up: "We know what we must do collectively. We know what we must do individually. And we have the strength to do what is best for us and to defend ourselves." The success recipe and its ingredients are all there. Asean must not fail. That must be our resolve.

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