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Mahathir-Message

IT'S ASIA PACIFIC'S OBLIGATION TO FIGHT POVERTY, SAYS DR MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 12 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said countries in the Asia Pacific region have a moral obligation to help the poor break out of poverty and to ensure that their basic needs are met.

The prime minister said most countries in the region were struggling with poverty although the region was one of the most resource-rich in the world.

The problem was particularly acute among rural women who remained "the poorest of the poor" in many countries, he said in his message in the souvenir programme of the six-day Regional Steering Committee on Economic Advancement of Rural and Island Women for the Asia Pacific (RSC-AP) Meeting, which he will open here tomorrow.

The RSC-AP, a network of advocates comprising first ladies, prominent women and wives of heads of government within the Asia Pacific, is dedicated to eradicating the increasing phenomenon of poverty among women in a region which is noted to have the most number of poor households in the world.

"We have been fortunate to have had close cooperative relations among countries in this region that allow us to share and consult one another on a wide range of issues of common concern," Dr Mahathir said.

He said Malaysia had addressed the problem of poverty throughout its five-year economic development plans since the 1960s which had resulted in a decline in the poverty rate from 42.4 per cent in 1976 to 9.6 per cent last year.

Despite these impressive gains, much work remained to be done, he said.

Dr Mahathir said the RSC-AP meeting reflected the high commitment that the members placed on the economic advancement of rural women in the region.

"This meeting is one more step towards the noble endeavour. It is my hope that this meeting will achieve fruitful results which we can all share together as a common heritage," he said.

The 14-member RSC-AP was established following the decision of the First Meeting of First Ladies/Representatives of the First Ladies of the Asia Pacific Region in Beijing on Sept 5 last year, concurrent with the Fourth World Conference on Women.

The committee is responsible for preparing the regional plans of action and monitoring the progress of their implementation. Other activities include the preparation and implementation of specific regional and sub-regional activities such as training for rural women and research on the subject.

The meeting will be attended by representatives of member countries -- Pakistan, Iran, India, Vietnam, Australia, Maldives, Malaysia, Indonesia, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Kazakhstan, China, Tonga, and Uzbekistan -- and observers from countries like Japan, Thailand and Brunei.

Seven countries will be represented by their first ladies. They are Begum Kulsoom from Pakistan, Zohreh Khatami Sadeghi (Iran), Usha Narayanan (India), Vo Thi Le (Vietnam), Erenjavyn Shurentsetseg (Mongolia) and Mairam Akaeva (Kyrgyzstan).

Dr Mahathir's wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, who is also the RSC-AP chairman, will also be present. -- BERNAMA

RAZ JK