

03/10/1997

Dr M happy with efforts to boost Asean-Mercosur ties

A. Kadir Jasin in Montevideo (Uruguay)

MONTEVIDEO (Uruguay), Thurs: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad expressed firm hopes that consultations between Asean and Mercosur (Common Market of the South), would eventually lead to closer links between the two regions.

He said he was happy to note that Asean and Mercosur had begun consultations to find ways to strengthen cooperation and economic interaction.

The members of Mercosur are Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. It was established in 1991 under the Treaty of Asuncion.

Dr Mahathir said apart from having much to offer each other in terms of technology, market complementarity, support and coordination at international levels on issues of common concern, the closer links would help keep the global trading system from being divided into exclusive blocs.

The Prime Minister was speaking at the official dinner held in his honour by Uruguayan President Julio Maria Sanguinetti last night. Dr Mahathir arrived here at midday yesterday for a two-day official visit.

The Prime Minister said such cooperation was important as there were those who had a tendency to think only in terms of their backyards and saw other regions only as markets to be exploited, controlled and brought into their own folds.

The world, Dr Mahathir said, had become much too small for nations to retreat behind closed economic blocs led by powerful leaders who dictated terms to the rest of members.

He said: "It is my hope, therefore, that Mercosur and Asean will play a historic role in helping to build bridges of trade, economic cooperation and mutual support between Latin America and Asia."

Touching on bilateral relations between Malaysia and Uruguay, the Prime Minister said although it had grown significantly over the last few years, the two countries still had a long way to go to forge the kind of economic relationship that they both desired.

This, he said, was a slow process especially as it was very dependent on the actions of their respective private sectors.

He, however, hoped that with the the appropriate legal and administrative framework needed for trade and economic cooperation having been put in place, the private sectors of both countries would respond positively.

He said the real task of building a solid economic relationship must rest with the private sector.

"Let me assure you, Mr President, that I am determined to encourage and support the Malaysian private sector involved in Uruguay to try to the fullest extent of its capabilities," he said.

He, however, admitted that there might be mistakes and delays as Mercosur was a new region for Malaysia and its businessmen.

"But I am confident that the Malaysian private sector will bring to our relationship the same tenacity and resourcefulness that helped it to transform the Malaysian economy into a powerhouse in Asia," he said.

Soon after his arrival from Santiago, Chile, the Prime Minister and his official delegation held a meeting with President Sanguinetti.

At the same time, the Malaysian business delegation accompanying the Prime Minister was briefed by Uruguayan Minister for the Economy Luis

Mosca, at Victoria Plaza Hotel where the Malaysian visitors are staying.

Today, Dr Mahathir held a breakfast meeting with Uruguayan businessmen and later received the keys to the City of Montevideo.

Speaking at the function, Prime Minister said Malaysia would be happy to cooperate with the Montevideo city administration and provide training in a number of relevant fields under the Malaysia Technical Cooperation Programme.

In a visit to the Uruguayan supreme court, Dr Mahathir shared some of his thoughts on the judiciary with the judges.

He said it was often forgotten that a prerequisite for development was a judicial system that understood and supported the aspirations of the people for both development and justice.

"Justice without development will leave us impoverished and at the mercy of other nations," he said, adding he had always argued that poverty was the greatest injustice of all.

On the other hand, he said, development without justice could not be sustained in the long run.

"And so I believe that the challenge for the judiciary, particularly in the developing countries, is to be supportive of and responsive to both the demand for justice and for development in equal measure," the Prime Minister said.

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