

08/08/1997

Dr M: Asean a success despite initial difficulties

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Asean had overcome its initial gloomy picture to emerge as one of the most cohesive regional groupings in the world.

He said Asean leaders had been able to pull through despite early difficulties to make a success of the organisation, and not just in terms of economic co-operation which was never its principal objective.

"I must admit that when Asean was first formed, I was not too hopeful that it would succeed," said Dr Mahathir.

"There were too many differences between the parties to the agreement ... major differences.

"It would not be possible for them to co-operate - but I must say I was wrong."

Dr Mahathir said this in an interview in conjunction with the 30th anniversary of the founding of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations tomorrow.

The Bangkok Declaration to set up the regional grouping was signed on Aug 8, 1967 by five founding members - Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. Brunei joined in 1984 while Vietnam was admitted in 1995 to make it Asean 7.

It was to have been Asean 10, encompassing all countries in Southeast Asia last month with the admission of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar. However while Laos and Myanmar are now in, Cambodia's induction has been deferred because of an internal power struggle.

Dr Mahathir said when Asean was formed, it was basically to help resolve problems between neighbours.

There was some kind of tension but Asean provided a forum to resolve the problems, if not fully, at least to reduce the tension.

The member countries learnt from each other the right approach and whereas initially - possibly due to independence and nationalism - certain countries seemed to reject foreign participation in their economy, it was later seen that foreign investment could contribute towards a country's development.

As a result, all the Asean countries opened up their economies to foreign investors and this had resulted in economic growth and subsequent prosperity.

With the transfer of technology, Asean countries themselves became capable of taking part in industrialisation.

"So I would say that over the 30 years, the initial gloomy picture has been overcome and Asean has emerged as one of the most cohesive groupings in the world," said Dr Mahathir who will host an informal meeting of Asean heads of government in December.

On his fears for the region, Dr Mahathir said Asean must be wary of efforts by outside parties to dominate their economies.

"There is a real danger of our economy being totally dominated by foreign companies with huge sums of money and greater technology."

He said the only way for Asean to react was to act together.

On the possibility of a conflict erupting over the Spratly islands territorial claims, especially with the biggest claimant being China, the Prime Minister said he did not think there would be an open conflict.

He said there would be some strain and tension perhaps but open conflict was something that he could not foresee.

China, Malaysia, the Philippines, Vietnam, Taiwan and Brunei lay claim to part or the entire string of atolls and coral reefs in the South China Sea which are believed to be rich in oil and other resources.

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