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Economic strength best defence: PM (HL)

Ahirudin Attan

ASEAN, which now groups nine countries with close to half a billion people, must continue to focus on economic development for economic strength is the key to regional security and the shield for the Asean economies to protect themselves from self-serving rogues and international brigandage.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said in a world dedicated to economic growth through a free market system, territorial acquisition is no longer worthwhile and no longer a source of wealth and power.

"Economic strength is all important," he said when opening the 30th Asean Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. The meeting marks the inclusion of Laos and Myanmar as Asean's eighth and ninth members, almost 30 years since the grouping was incepted on August 8 1967.

Dr Mahathir said those who talk of military conquests and colonisation are living in the past and know very well that hegemony can come in other forms. The threat faced by nations are economic sanctions that impoverish the people and stir internal strife. Weakened, the unfortunate countries will have to submit as completely as if they are colonies.

"We should therefore concentrate on economic development and the well-being of our people. And Asean countries have demonstrated that they know how to do this.

"Now, together with our new members, the South-East Asian countries can cooperate and help each other to prosper. That way, we will become internally stable and less susceptible to the kind of outside pressures our detractors like to apply," he said.

Dr Mahathir said economic prosperity is also the answer to Asean's security problems because a prosperous Asean will be taken more seriously and its views respected.

"It is for this reason that whenever our foreign ministers meet, it is usual for the major economies of the world to have ministerial dialogues with us. Even on matters of security we have devised a regional forum in order to thrash out perceived problems.

"No other regional organisation has such an arrangement."

Dr Mahathir also said as a grouping of developing countries, Asean will need to know how new concepts concerning international commerce and politics will affect it.

"The world now talks glibly of a borderless world, of the Information Age, of open markets and open societies ... It is wonderful to know that all the huge markets of the developed countries will be open to us in exchange for our opening up of our tiny markets. But can we really gain access to these markets? Or will the removal of borders cause a flow in one direction only?"

Dr Mahathir then cited "a well-planned effort to undermine the economies of (Asean) member countries by destabilising their currencies".

"Our economic fundamentals are good, yet anyone with a few billion dollars can destroy all the progress that we have made. We are told we must open up, that trade and commerce must be totally free. Free for whom? For rogue speculators. For anarchists wanting to destroy weak countries in their crusade for open societies, to force us to submit to the dictatorship of international manipulators.

"We want to embrace borderlessness but we still need to protect ourselves from self-serving rogues and international brigandage," he said.

Already, the Prime Minister said, "we are seeing giant companies swallowing up chunks of the business in the developing world.

"They monopolise the services sector through their huge shipping lines, airlines, insurance companies, banks and companies. The media, print and electronic, are now controlled by them throughout the world. We are denied press freedom by the very people who trumpet it. Only bad news about us are published, the good news are often buried in their archives.

"We worry, we should worry about this borderless world of the Information Age and the free market. We are not rejecting it out of hand. But we should know where we stand. We should know how we are going to handle the problems which will arise.

"Already, eight of the most powerful nations have decided that they, and they alone, should determine the fate of every country. When they agree on anything, for example the revaluation of the yen, we have to pay the price. And when they quarrel, we will be trampled under."

Alone, none of the South-East Asian countries will be able to protect itself. "But nine Asean countries with half a billion people may be able to do something to help ourselves," Dr Mahathir said.

"In this region, we believe in a prosper-thy-neighbour policy. This is not due to altruism. It is motivated by selfishness. Prosperous neighbours make good trading partners and give each other less problems. The problems of poor neighbours tend to spill over their borders.

"But we must not be passive in the exercise of this policy. We should actively help each other. Certainly, the newer members of our association are going to need help in order to catch up with the rest.

"I believe there is an Asean formula for success, for how else can we explain why every Asean country has shown rapid economic growth and political stability? We must help every country to make use of this formula so that we can all be stable and prosperous," he added.