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Mahathir-New Asia

HELP MAKE "NEW ASIA" A REALITY, MAHATHIR TELLS WEST ASIAN NATIONS

By: Abdul Rahman Ahmad

MANAMA, April 8 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has urged West Asian nations to help make the rise of a "New Asia" a reality by looking East, especially to Asean countries.

He said it would be a mistake for West Asia, which comprises the Arab countries and Persian Gulf states, to seek wealth and know-how only from the rich old world of Europe and North America.

"Look East ... Malaysia looked East without stopping to look West and we have benefited immensely. The people of West Asia will lose nothing by looking East but indeed you can gain and gain a lot," he said in his keynote address at the fifth annual conference of the Gulf Economic Forum here.

Dr Mahathir, who is on a three-day visit to Bahrain after a similar trip to Kuwait, said West Asian nations could help make the Asian Renaissance complete and a reality.

"First you are in West Asia. You are not the Middle East, to the East of Europe, the middle of the East. You can locate yourself in the middle of the world if you so choose," said the Malaysian leader in his typically thought-provoking speech.

" West Asia on the other hand is part of Asia by all means look North, West and do not neglect the South but whatever you do, don't forget to go East, to the benefit of us in your East, to the benefit of the Europeans to your North and to your own benefit," he said.

He said this year seven of the fastest growing economies will be from East Asia and Asean -- comprising Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam -- needed and wanted West Asia in the making of their future.

Despite the finest efforts of the "Asiaskeptics", largely congregated in the so-called "West", Dr Mahathir was convinced that the so-called "Far East" (as the Europeans insist on calling Asean countries) would increasingly be the centre of economic gravity.

"You have a vital interest in being with us, in profiting from the most dynamic economic development region," he said adding that by the time it entered the 21st century, Asia will almost certainly be the largest regional economy in the world, bigger than Western Europe and bigger than North America.

Dr Mahathir said Asia was set to rise and become great conqueror like in the past but this time to achieve economic power which could balance those of Europe and America.

He said in the 19th century, when Europe grew by three per cent over an extended period of time, this was called "the Industrial Revolution". But for 50 years now, the major economies of the East stretching from Japan to Indonesia, the world's most populous Muslim nation, have been growing between two to three times faster.

"The rise of Asia has begun in all earnestness, but the interest of Asia lies not in the Age of Asia or in the so-called Asian century. Asia should not seek arrogance, dominance or hegemony," he said.

It was no surprise that the writers of the West struggling to understand what was happening have decided to call this "the East Asian Miracle", he said adding the the results have truly been astounding and miraculous.

"We are not just people, or economies or even countries. They say we

are dragons and tigers," said Dr Mahathir.

The Prime Minister said East Asia had defied all negative predictions of the "Asiaskeptics" to become almost uniformly prosperous because by accident or by design, "prosper thy neighbour has become its philosophy."

"But why should East Asia not share its enriching philosophy and practice with the rest of the world, in particular with West Asia surely by sharing East Asia will be richer even as West Asia become richer than it already is, then and then only will the Asian Renaissance be completed," he said.

In his view, Asia should not strive to dominate the world but should strive to balance the dominance of the West so that they will create a more equitable world, a commonwealth of the world where the wealth is truly common, not possessed only by a privileged few.

Turning to Malaysia, he said the country which had a per capita income of US\$227 at the time of its independence in 1957 had managed to reach per capita income of US\$4,374 last year.

" If Malaysia were located in the Western Hemisphere, it would today have the third highest standard of living in all of the Americas, coming only after the United States and Canada," he said.

He said in the short space of 15 years, Malaysia has managed to become the fourth most industrialised economy in the world in terms of population size while in term of the percentage of manufactured goods in its export market, it is the first five in the world.

In 1980, only 24 per cent of Malaysia's exports consisted of manufactured goods but today it had shot up to 82 per cent. It now had to import rubber and tin for its industries, commodities for which it once was the biggest producer and exporter in the world.

Having in the last 15 years moved from being an agricultural economy to an industrial state, Malaysia now had to grapple with the transition in the near future to the post-industrial society.

" The results of the so-called East Asian miracle for Malaysia and the other dragons and tigers of the East Asia have truly been quite remarkable," he said.

Dr Mahathir, whose favourite song is Frank Sinatra's "My Way", spoke of what he called the "Sinatra Principle".

" In specifics, we all accomplished what we have accomplished according to the "Sinatra Principle". We all did our way but more than that ... we also all did it the old fashioned way, without mystery of magic, but with a great deal of toil, tears and sweat," he said.

He also dispelled the notion that Malaysians, most of whom are Muslims, are lazy people.

Dr Mahathir surprised the conference by saying that in fact, Malaysians are working harder than the Japanese.

He said on the average, Malaysians work 2,288 hours in a year, compared with 1,940 hours for the Japanese and Israelis, the Swiss (1,879 hours) and Germans (1,704 hours).

Commenting on predictions by many "Asiaskeptics" about the end of the East Asia growth run, he said many such predictions were based on theories and fallacies by western thinkers.

"I will not dwell on what they think will happen to West Asia and the Arabs in the future. They are obviously very satisfied that you are facing some horrendous problems and they think you will never surmount them.

It is not that we feel absolutely certain of the future prosperity of East Asia, disasters can happen whatever may be planned by man, whatever they may do," he said.

But the predictions of the great thinkers of the West, he said, sounded too much like wishful thinking, but "our fear is that if it does not

happen, these prophets of doom might try to make sure it will happen."

"Arrogance is never justified ... it is always dangerous. Humility is always necessary. It is always a useful companion in our journey through life.," he said, adding that Asia will hold firmly to the secrets of the past and adjust rapidly to the demands of the future. -- BERNAMA

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