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It is Asean's right who it takes in, says PM

Kamarul Yunus in Okayama (Japan)

OKAYAMA (Japan), Sun: Malaysia together with other members of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) hope that there will be no obstruction for Cambodia in joining the grouping, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed says.

Noting that Asean's policy is not to interfere in the internal affairs of any country, he however said the grouping has the right to accept or reject an applicant.

It is Asean's basic right and should not be interpreted as an encroachment into the internal affairs of other countries, he said at an open dialogue with Okayama Governor Masahiro Ishii, and chairman of Okayama Keizai Doyukai and president of Sanyo Shimbun, Mr Katsumi Sasaki, here today.

"We hope there will be no obstruction for Cambodia, but at the moment the situation (in Cambodia) is not very clear... we have to defer its admission into Asean," he added.

The Prime Minister, who is on a two-month leave which ends on Tuesday, is on a six-day working and private visit to the Okayama and Toyama prefectures since Thursday.

Dr Mahathir was asked his views on the Asean-10 vision and its relation to the current political instability in Cambodia.

"We did hope that we could have Asean-10 with all the countries in South-East Asia joining the grouping (this week). But it appears that it would not be possible during the Asean Foreign Ministers meeting," he added.

Cambodia was initially scheduled to be admitted as a member along with Laos and Myanmar during the Asean Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur beginning July 23. However, its membership has been deferred in view of the factional fighting which broke out between forces loyal to Cambodian First Prime Minister Norodom Ranariddh and Second Prime Minister Hun Sen on July 5.

Ranariddh had fled to Paris before the crisis erupted and Hun Sen subsequently declared that the prince was no longer in power, demanding that the royalist FUNCINPEC party nominate a new First Prime Minister.

Following Asean's decision to postpone the entry of Cambodia, Hun Sen had threatened to withdraw Phnom Penh's application to join the grouping.

"No foreigners can dictate to Hun Sen," he was quoted as saying during his meeting with the foreign ministers of Thailand, the Philippines and Indonesia in Bangkok at the weekend.

To a question on the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC), Dr Mahathir reiterated that the EAEC is not a trade bloc but a forum to discuss issues of common concern. It is a platform to enhance cooperation between East Asian and South-East Asian nations and to provide the smaller countries with a voice when dealing with the developed nations.

"Countries in South-East Asia need a stronger voice like that of Japan and China in East Asia. East Asia has more clout and through a common stand we (South-East Asia) will be better able to make our views known when discussing with the European Union, for example," he added.

Through the EAEC, Dr Mahathir said, the region will be in a better position to counter unfair decisions made by the European countries or the US.

At this point, the Prime Minister praised Japan's move to lodge a

complaint with the World Trade Organisation (WTO) over a Massachusetts law which bans foreign companies investing in Myanmar from doing business with the state government.

Dr Mahathir said this is a case of a developed country's domestic policy threatening to jeopardise the international trade relations of other countries.

"If Japan succeeds in taking up the matter with the WTO, countries like Malaysia will benefit. If Malaysia were to file a similar report, our voice would not be heard. Thus, we should speak with one voice, like through the EAEC," he added.

The European Union had also filed a similar complaint against the Massachusetts law in late June.

Asked to comment on China's growing economic clout in the region, Dr Mahathir said there should not be any attempt to block China's development.

"China has the right to carry out its economic development. We must accept that it will be stronger.

"Malaysia does not look at China as a potential enemy because if we do, we may have it as an enemy now. The best thing is to accept that the country will become powerful and work with it to contribute to the prosperity of the region," he added.

China, in any case, is a potentially huge market for its neighbouring countries, including Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said, adding that trying to constrain China, militarily or otherwise would not be advisable.

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