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PM: Overcome women's poverty (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Efforts to help women in the Asia Pacific region to escape from the clutches of poverty are more crucial now than ever before, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today, adding that they were among the poorest in the world.

The Prime Minister said it was timely for countries in the region to have their own institutions to assist the poor because certain international financial organisations which were set up for this purpose had deviated from their original aim.

Dr Mahathir said these organisations had instead served the big financial institutions and foundations in the guise of assisting the poorest.

The Prime Minister was speaking at the opening of the meeting of the Regional Steering Committee on the Economic Advancement of Rural and Island Women of the Asia-Pacific Region (RSC-AP) at the Nikko Hotel.

The RSC-AP, a network of advocates comprising first ladies, prominent women and wives of heads of governments in the Asia Pacific, is dedicated to eradicating poverty among women in the region.

The Prime Minister said there were grounds to believe that the time was propitious for a new initiative.

He said that despite concerted efforts to eradicate poverty in the region, a large number of women still lived in poverty.

He added that the feminisation of poverty had led to the realisation of the need to develop more effective and appropriate policies, strategies and programmes to improve the living standards of rural women.

NGOs, he said, had played important roles in poverty reduction, complementing efforts to improve the lives of the poor and generally increasing productivity and the more equitable sharing of national wealth.

The Prime Minister paid tribute to institutions such as the Grameen Bank, the Association for Social Advancement, the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee and Amanah Ikhtiar Malaysia which have successfully reached out to thousands of poor women in rural areas.

"The important discovery of micro-financing, a powerfully effective and efficient tool in poverty eradication and in bridging the income gap between the poor and the rich, marks the beginning of a new era towards the ultimate eradication of poverty in our nations," he said.

He added that one of the factors impeding the goal of poverty eradication in the Asia-Pacific region was funding for the numerous micro-financing institutions.

Dr Mahathir said the 70 million poor women in the Asia-Pacific region were among the poorest in the world.

He added that mobilisation of financial resources from within individual nations should be the first step towards self-reliance.

"This is more appropriate than relying on multilateral and bilateral donors. The indifference of rich countries to our economic situation should motivate us to take the initiatives to look into the potential of this region for alternative paths to sustainable progress."

Dr Mahathir said collectively, the nations represented in the RSC-AP could mobilise resources without the need to be over-dependent on developed economies.

He added that if countries of the region were to get their act together in promoting and implementing micro-financing for self-employment, they

could expect large-scale poverty reduction in the next decade.

He also said that the MFIs would then complement the national goal and self-reliance strategy in their communities, thus reducing dependence on foreign donors.

The Prime Minister said in Malaysia, the progressive national and rural development efforts over the past four decades had reduced the poverty rate from more than 70 per cent in 1969 to less than 10 per cent at the end of the Sixth Malaysia Plan.

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