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UN wants closer ties with Asean

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - The United Nations needs to develop more strategic alliances with regional organisations such as Asean, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan said tonight.

Annan said the UN could only provide its much-needed services including peacekeeping, conflict resolution and development, with help from regional, national and local bodies.

"Along with non-governmental organisations, the private sector, academic institutions and other civil society groups, regional groups are increasingly influential and effective.

"The international community, in its pursuit of the common good, must harness the myriad contributions that they are uniquely placed to make," he said at a dinner talk on the UN's role in global and regional matters, organised by the Institute for Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

Earlier, Annan called on Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim at Carcosa Seri Negara, where they held a discussion on UN reforms.

Anwar played host at a lunch for Annan and his wife Nane, as well as other members of the UN delegation.

Also present were Anwar's wife Datin Seri Dr Wan Azizah Wan Ismail, Deputy Foreign Minister Datuk Dr Leo Michael Toyad, Deputy Education Minister Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn, Deputy Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Nazri Aziz and Malaysia's head of delegation to the UN Commission on Human Rights, Tan Sri Musa Hitam.

In his dinner talk, Annan said the "prosper thy neighbour" policy, often espoused by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, lay at the heart of the founding philosophy of inter-governmental organisations such as the UN and Asean.

He said Malaysia, as one of the developing world's most advanced economies, had the remarkable voice of an outward-looking country with a multiracial society, a voice of the South as well as being "a voice of the future for all nations".

He added the questions facing Asean, including that of economic development, the environment, individual rights, regional tensions and the development of a civil society, were also on the agenda of other regions as well as of the UN itself.

Thus, he said, the argument for global and regional policies which considered the needs and vulnerabilities of developing nations was not a mere slogan. Instead, it was a practical approach as more and more aspects of contemporary life transcended borders.

"In a world of global threats and global opportunities, all countries stand to benefit from international co-operation. And no country is exempt from the risks of doing without it," he said.

Asean's biggest success lay in the progress of its economic and social development, Annan said.

He added that developing countries were becoming the global economy's new frontier for expanding trade, investment, production and finance.

"While world trade has been growing at a rate of 7.4 per cent per year, trade within Asean and between Asean and other developing countries has been growing at roughly 19 per cent annually.

"Intra-Asean trade, valued at US\$3.7 billion (RM14 billion) when trade preferences were put in place in 1976, reached US\$53 billion (RM201 billion) in 1994 - more than one-fifth of the region's total trade," he

said.

Acknowledging the concern of Southeast Asians about economic and regional security, Annan said most observers expected the region to overcome its immediate difficulties and return to its path of vigorous growth.

South-South co-operation and private sector contribution would also go a long way towards sustaining economic gains, he said, acknowledging Asean's contribution to South-South dialogue.

Annan said recent years had put to rest fears that regional groups such as Asean would be inward-looking or protectionism-oriented.

"To some, multilateralism is an encroachment on national sovereignty. I say without reservation that it is an asset," he said, adding that it enabled the sharing of political or financial burdens and experience, as well as expressing of shared values.

Thus, he said, it was regretful that peace and democracy "have proven so fragile" in Cambodia, and that those developments had led to the postponement of Cambodia's entry into Asean.

"It is my hope that our ongoing efforts will help improve the current situation, for the sake of all Cambodians so that the country can be admitted in due course," he said.

Also present were Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and his wife, Datin Seri Endon Mahmood.

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