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Mahathir-Asean  
ASEAN STILL INTACT, SAYS MAHATHIR

By: E.Sivabalan

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN, Oct 29 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the spirit of unity and cooperation among Asean countries as a grouping remains intact despite the problems between some member states.

Describing the problems as hiccups, the Prime Minister said Asean would overcome them in the Asean spirit.

"I think Asean as a grouping is still intact. The problems between some Asean countries can be described as hiccups.

"We will overcome them," he told a news conference after a four-eye meeting with Brunei Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, who is also Brunei's Prime Minister, at Istana Nurul Iman, here.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations or Asean groups Brunei, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Dr Mahathir, who arrived here today for a two-day working visit, earlier had an audience with Sultan Hassanal.

The Prime Minister said this when asked if his visit to Brunei despite the comments by certain Asean countries against the internal affairs of a member state has signified that Asean as a grouping was still intact.

The Prime Minister said the Asean solidarity was still intact.

"Basically, it is still there," he said.

Asked if there was some kind of foreign element trying to shake the spirit of solidarity and cooperation among Asean countries, Dr Mahathir said he did not know if there was any such plan.

"But certainly the way they are going about indicate that they would like to see Asean break-up," he said.

Asked how the "hiccups" could be overcome, Dr Mahathir said "one sure way of overcoming hiccups is not to talk (comment)."

"And that is why I am reluctant to talk," said Dr Mahathir.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia and a number of other Asean countries did not agree that one member state should comment on the internal affairs of another member state.

"I think if we start doing that, then that will be very bad for you because we all have got a lot of things to criticise about each other," he said.

Asked what approach Asean members should adopt to ensure that they do not interfere in the internal affairs of member states, Dr Mahathir said that up to now Asean members never agreed to interference in its internal affairs by member countries.

The Prime Minister said that he quite agree with the statement by his Thai counterpart, Chuan Leekpai, that if an Asean member country wish to criticise anything about another member country, then it should be done "one-to-one".

Asked by a Brunei journalist if ministers from Asean countries too should not make comments about the internal affairs of member countries, Dr Mahathir said "not only ministers but other people who are holding responsible position in their government."

Asked how he foresees Asean unity in the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) Summit in Kuala Lumpur next month, Dr Mahathir said the unity was still there.

"Of course, we have different experiences (like) Malaysia's experience is different from Indonesia or Thailand," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Asean countries would reach consensus in dealing with certain issues at the Apec Summit such as the financial crisis.

The prime minister said during his discussions with Sultan Hassanah, they had among others touched on the situation in Cambodia.

He said they hoped that Cambodia would form a government soon for the country to be admitted into Asean.

Dr Mahathir said the matter would be discussed at the Asean Summit in Hanoi in December this year.

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