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`Crisis has given credence to formation of EAEC'

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WOULD Asia have been more united and firm against attacks on its currencies if the East Asian Economic Caucus had been formalised before these attacks started?

"I guess we will never know," Education Minister Datuk Seri Mohd Najib Abdul Razak told an international seminar organised by the Japanese Embassy and the Malaysian Strategic Research Centre yesterday.

"... One thing seems clear. A regional organisation could have got us together sooner to discuss the crisis and take a common approach, if not a common stand," he said.

Najib posed the EAEC question to participants of the third international seminar on the creation of an "Asian Community" when suggesting that the proposed grouping be formalised to enable Asian countries to take a common economic approach when dealing with future issues.

He said the Asian economic crisis has given credence to the establishment of the EAEC.

Asian countries, he added, should take the opportunity during the current crisis to build an "East Asian bloc", which he described as "a building made in East Asia for East Asian interests."

In his luncheon address on "Future of Asia: Challenges of the New Millennium", the minister suggested that the effect on the regional currency crisis would have been different had the EAEC been established.

The crisis, which started in July last year, has brought down the economies of Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea.

Hong Kong is now battling currency speculators while Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines are among countries still reeling from the effects of the crisis.

Japanese Ambassador to Malaysia Issei Nomura and former deputy prime minister Tan Sri Musa Hitam were among those who attended the luncheon.

Najib said he believes that if the regional currencies are "tied together", it would have made the assault on the currencies more difficult.

"It will certainly discourage the currency speculators," he added.

He said the time is ripe for such a regional platform as the EAEC to emerge and called on Asian leaders at all level of societies to re-look and re-examine the notion of a regional organisation.

He said it is not too late for the region to establish EAEC as a forum to discuss issues of common interest.

"I believe we must keep the flame of such an idea alive," he said.

There is no reason for Asia not to join together economically as Europe, despite its enormous differences and brutal fights over the centuries, had done it.

"Of course it will take time, perhaps even a whole generation, but we must take the first step towards this direction. We have missed a golden opportunity when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad first made the proposal. Let us not miss this time around," he said.

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