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Mahathir-Africa

MAHATHIR ANNOUNCES NEW INITIATIVE TO HELP AFRICA

By: Azman Ujang

TOKYO, Oct 19 (Bernama) -- A major aid conference for Africa began here today with an announcement by Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that Malaysia, France and Japan have embarked on a new initiative to help the poverty-stricken continent.

The trilateral initiative is based on African countries, for decades recipients of aid from donor nations, taking ownership of their own development in a continent of 1.2 billion people which Dr Mahathir said has "lost almost half a century".

"The overarching objective of building a partnership rather than a donor recipient relationship is a unique approach through which the three countries hope to contribute, in a modest way, to promote the social and economic development of Africa," he said at the opening of the second Tokyo International Conference on African Development (TICAD II) here.

The three-day conference is attended by leaders and senior officials of 52 African countries, Asia, North America and Europe. Asian nations such as China, Malaysia, South Korea, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia are taking part in the conference for the first time.

The prime minister said Japan, France and even Malaysia were in a position to help Africans overcome their shortcomings especially through the involvement of the private sector.

They could help set up job-creating industries because Africans are very skillful in the same manner as Japan helped Malaysia to prosper when they came to the country to invest.

"As a bonus a prosperous Malaysia has become a good market for Japanese goods. The benefits for those extending a helping hand to develop countries are therefore two-fold. The benefits are also mutual. It is truly a win-win venture," said Dr Mahathir.

He said in Africa, with a little orientation the basic skills could be turned into industrial skills, adding that industries could do well in Africa as they had done well in the countries of Asia, including Southeast Asia.

"As much as Japan profited from Malaysian prosperity, Japan and France will profit even more from African development and prosperity. Africa is naturally rich. Its resources are huge. In fact it is these resources that had attracted the Europeans in the past," the prime minister said.

Dr Mahathir was also encouraged by the fact that certain parts of Africa had become more peaceful and their governments interested in the development of their countries and the well-being of their people but were handicapped due to poverty and the lack of experience and expertise.

He said the post-independence turmoil lasted a bit longer in Africa than in Asia but now all over Africa there was a keen desire to give the people the kind of life they deserved as independent people.

Africa had the desire but not the skills and the means and for this Asian countries should stretch out a helping hand because not only it would not cost them much, they would eventually be amply repaid.

On the Japan-initiated aid conference for Africa, a follow-up to TICAD I held five years ago, the prime minister said Japan's relatively new-found interest in the well-being of the continent was most welcome.

He said African, Asian and even Europeans would benefit from the stabilisation and prosperity of Africa brought about by the cooperative efforts of the three continents.

Dr Mahathir urged participating countries to focus on Africa to make up for the loss of time, adding that "there is everything to gain and nothing to lose by prospering Africa, a close neighbour in a shrinking world".

After addressing the conference on behalf of Asia, the visiting premier held a meeting with heads of three Malaysian diplomatic missions in East Asia, Ambassador to Japan Tan Sri Khatib Abdul Hamid, Ambassador to China Datuk Abdul Majid Khan and Ambassador to South Korea V. Yoogalingam.

Khatib said the prime minister briefed them on the latest economic and political developments back home.

Earlier in opening the conference, Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi said winds of change were sweeping across Africa as the end of the Cold War had brought about democratization and market-oriented economies which had begun to have a positive impact on the continent.

He said nearly 20 African countries were now achieving a gross domestic product (GDP) growth of around 5 per cent and politically many countries had been holding free elections based on multi-party system.

Obuchi spoke fondly of his first contact with the continent during a trip to several African countries as a young man in the 1960's, adding that "it is indeed a great pleasure for me to see that the bright future for Africa that I foresaw 30 years ago is being realised in many African countries today."

But Obuchi said poverty still remained widespread and deeply-rooted and conflicts between nations in the continent, ethnic disputes and massive refugee flows were re-emerging.

"These problems threaten peace and stability which are the pre-requisites for sustainable development. They are of critical concern not only for the African countries but also the international community," he said.

He underlined the importance of ownership in development for African nations, saying this was one of the lessons from Japan's own experience in development cooperation with its partner countries in Asia.

Obuchi said he could not over-emphasise that political stability, through the resolution and prevention of conflict and the advancement of democratisation, was indispensable for development in Africa.

To accomplish this, African countries must improve their capacity for conflict prevention, and should achieve good governance by ensuring the rule of law, administrative transparency and free and fair elections, within the context of their own culture and historical tradition.

"In regard to the conflicts that plague Africa at present, I would like to take this opportunity to strongly appeal to all of the parties involved for compassion and understanding, so that the mediating efforts being undertaken by African leaders can result in their peaceful resolution," he said.

Despite Japan, the world's biggest aid donor, facing great economic and financial difficulties, Obuchi said it would continue to play a leading role for development cooperation in Africa mainly for basic human needs such as primary education, health and medical care and the supply of clean and safe water.

He said the critical role of the private sector must be recognised for the African development and to foster growth of the private sector in the continent, especially through the promotion of trade with and investment from Asia.

United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, who will close the conference on Wednesday, in a message says Africa has reached a critical turning point in its history.

"After an era of decolonialisation and a period characterised by civil wars, military rule and economic stagnation, a third wave is beginning in

Africa -- one of peace, democracy, human rights and sustainable development," says the Ghana-born Annan.

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