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Mahathir-Asean

MAINTAIN SOLIDARITY TO OVERCOME CRISIS, MAHATHIR TELLS ASEAN

By: E Sivabalan

HANOI, Dec 15 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today urged Asean to adhere to its founding principles on the conduct of ties between member states, stressing that economic recovery in Asean can be expedited only in an improved regional and international environment.

"Although the region's economic crisis has put some strain on the ties between Asean countries and the group itself, Asean has the wherewithal to pull through this turbulent period," he said in his opening statement at the Sixth Asean Summit here.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia believed that the maintenance of positive interstate relations has to be consciously nurtured.

He urged Asean countries to stick to the Asean method of work and the principles governing the conduct of relations between member states as contained in the group's various declarations, treaties and statements over the years.

"We should adhere to them," Dr Mahathir said.

Asean comprises Brunei, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

He said 30 years of Asean cooperation has given Southeast Asia the stability and solidarity which contributed to unprecedented economic growth and rising standard of living.

"Unfortunately, the economic crisis severely tested the resilience of Asean member countries. Our association, and relations between its members, have come under some strain," Dr Mahathir said.

The prime minister said Asean's responses to the challenges confronting the region have created the impression of "an Asean in disarray, its members at odds with one another."

Asean's policy of non-interference or "constructive engagement" had been questioned by some member countries recently with Thailand moving toward a more outspoken position of "flexible engagement", encouraging talks on political issues of mutual concern.

But, others notably Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore have opposed the idea, fearing it would undermine relations between members in the 31-year-old economic grouping.

Dr Mahathir said the Hanoi summit should help create an environment conducive to positive relations between Asean and regional growth.

"I am therefore pleased that the Hanoi Declaration which we will sign later and the Hanoi Plan of Action which we are going to adopt have reiterated the many principles and undertakings upon which we commit ourselves," he said.

Speaking at length on the economic crisis that has hit the region, the prime minister said Malaysia strongly supported initiatives aimed at strengthening regional economic cooperation and consolidating the economic fundamentals of Asean countries.

"We will cooperate with our Asean partners to strengthen and to insulate the region from external disturbances as much as possible," he said.

The prime minister said Kuala Lumpur continued to support greater economic integration and the acceleration of the Asean Free Trade Area (Afta).

-- BERNAMA

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