

05/04/1998

Call to rethink Asian-European ties

Ashraf Abdullah; Joseph Bingsakan in London

STRESSING that partnerships between nations and regions can only be built on pragmatism, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said it was timely for Asia and Europe to rethink their relationship.

"In the partnership between Europe and Asia, let us not be fanatical about the means, to the extent that we forget the ends," he said in his keynote address at the Asia-Europe Partnership Conference. "Let us be pragmatic."

"Today, the peoples of Asia have lost their means of sustenance because governments of Europe have decided to abdicate their role in favour of the free market."

The two-day conference is being organised by Wilton Park International Conferences, Asia House, the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute and the Centre of Research and Communications.

The Prime Minister had earlier attended the two-day Second Asia-Europe Meeting which ended here yesterday.

Asking if there could be partnerships between Europe and Asia without Governments, the Prime Minister also posed the query whether the market could provide partners and a partnership that went beyond merely maximising profits.

"Should partnerships be between equals with fair shares or should partnerships be between clients and patrons?" he asked.

Dr Mahathir gave the assurance that Europe would not lose from developing smart partnerships with Asia as they had nothing to fear from sharing the wealth generated.

"We would really be helping to build a better world," he said. "Europeans have already made known their concern and desire to see people everywhere enjoy human rights and a better life."

Besides, by enriching partners, the contributing partners would gain, he said.

Dr Mahathir questioned the effectiveness of market forces in disciplining Governments and to ensure they were more accountable, open and transparent, less corrupt and not given to crony-capitalism.

"These are very laudable objectives," he said, "but can market forces really do this? Can they have these high economic and social objectives?"

Dr Mahathir said although it could not be disputed that the free market had contributed towards the people's general wealth, the success of the system was also due to the regulation and control exercised by society through their Governments.

"Can a market totally free of controls, moved largely by a profit motive, contribute to the disciplining of Governments and to a better society?" he asked.

Dr Mahathir said Governments and the business community of these Asian countries had been blamed for the turmoil.

"But the devaluation of their currencies is not done by them," he said. "Market players from elsewhere, suddenly conscious of the misbehaviour of these Asians, lost their confidence and devalued their currencies."

It was the devaluation of the currencies and the depreciation of the share prices which caused the turmoil, the economic decline, the unemployment, the impoverishment, the political and economic unrest, Dr Mahathir said.

He opined that the attempt to discipline Governments and peoples of Asia

was perhaps laudable but the cost to the people in whose attempts were made, was horrendous.

"On the other hand, the people disciplining the Governments have made billions of dollars. It is a profitable way to take disciplinary action."

Dr Mahathir made it clear that it was the legitimate right for Asian countries to develop and progress.

"We want to eradicate poverty in our midst, to educate and provide health care for our people. We are not forgetting human rights but we believe that one of the fundamental human rights is the right to work for a decent living," he said. "Freedom to be poor was not freedom at all."

He said it was clear that Asia and Europe wanted to form a partnership but it could only be entered into if the results were mutually beneficial.

"Since modern technology has made us all next door neighbours," he said, "it is important that we take the idea of reshaping our relations seriously."

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