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`Time for East Asian grouping'

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Education Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak today called for the establishment of a regional organisation representing East Asian countries.

He said the proposed organisation could "help us get together to discuss the current economic problems" and safeguard the interests of East Asia.

Such an organisation, he said, would enable the countries involved to take a common approach and be united against all odds.

"It could well be argued that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was ahead of his time when he proposed the setting up of the East Asian Economic Caucus.

"I would like to suggest that the present Asian economic problem has given credence to Dr Mahathir's vision. We must keep the flame of such an idea alive."

Najib urged Asian leaders "from the very top to the various levels of societies" to re-look and re-examine the notion of a regional organisation.

"The time is ripe for such a regional platform to emerge which will truly represent the interests of East Asia."

Najib said this at the opening of the one-day third International Seminar on "Dialogue Among Young Generations on the Creation of an Asian Community" organised by the Malaysian Strategic Research Centre.

Najib said it might not be in the interests of "outside powers" to see East Asian states join together economically.

"However, this could well be an opportune moment for us to think of ourselves.

"If Europe, despite enormous odds, having fought each other brutally for centuries, could come together, I cannot see why East Asia could not do the same.

"We had missed a golden opportunity when Dr Mahathir first made such a proposal. Let us not miss this time around."

Najib said others should not fear such an organisation, just as "we do not fear the European Union and the North American Free Trade Area".

Asian countries, he added, must be bold enough to divert its economies to reflect a much more national agenda, rather than an international one.

"The second factor is for Asian states to be more sensitive to each other. We must try and understand each other's aspirations."

Unfortunately, he said, mainly owing to historical legacies, there were many disputes among Asian countries. "The nature of disputes are plentiful, territorial being one of the more difficult issues.

"Most of us would agree that it is absurd to go to war over pieces of real estate but it may also be foolhardy to think that conflicts will not occur.

"We should, however, not push our own national agenda at the expense of regional peace and should never regard such issues as non-negotiable.

"Ultimatums will definitely lead to conflict, which none of us could afford. In this respect, one should sometimes make sacrifices for the sake of the larger picture," he said.

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