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Asia must continue with reformation: PM

Syed Nadzri in Tokyo

TOKYO, Thurs: Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says reformation is something Asia must undertake not only to recover from the regional economic crisis but also for the next 100 years.

"In the days ahead, we must continue - let me stress continue - with the needed reformation and re-invention of our economies and every critical aspect of our societies. This is what we have done for over a generation. s "It is something we must do over the coming hundred years," he said on the opening day of the International Conference on the Future of Asia organised by Nihon Keizai Shimbun at Okura Hotel here.

The two-day conference, which focuses on Asia's road to economic recovery, is attended by 350 high-ranking government officials and business leaders in the region. Apart from Dr Mahathir, invited speakers include Philippine President Joseph Estrada, Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas and Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

Dr Mahathir said one of the reforms urgently needed is that of the international monetary system, "a reform going beyond nice words and pious articulations about global architecture".

"It is interesting to note how many latter-day Neros preferred to fiddle even as East Asia was burning," he said.

Reform, according to the Prime minister, is one of three things Asia must pursue to ensure sustained economic growth. The others are to build on one's strengths and to be practical.

He said Asians must adopt their best practices and root out inferior and unproductive habits.

"But I am asserting as strongly as I know how that we would be insane to get rid of those strengths of the past which will continue to be our great strengths in the future," he added.

On the need for practicality, Dr Mahathir said it means doing what works and abandoning quickly what does not.

"As one of the great leaders of the century said: 'It does not matter whether the cat is black or white, so long as it catches mice'."

He said Malaysia tried almost everything in the face of the economic crisis which hit East Asia from July 2 1997, leading to the measures introduced on September 1 last year - de-internationalisation of the ringgit and, for a spell, outlawing foreigners exporting the proceeds from their equity investments.

"I do not want to recommend selective currency controls to anyone. But I do indeed wish to stress the necessity for cold-blooded pragmatism for everyone, in all parts of the world, under any circumstance."

Dr Mahathir underlined the responsibility that is being shouldered by youths who would carry Asia into the next millennium.

"The young of today, the builders of tomorrow, must not be corrupted by the corruption of powerlessness. Be fully empowered. Go forth. Build. Create a new and better world than we of the older generation have been able to build," he said.

In the question-and-answer session that followed, Dr Mahathir was asked about his views on globalisation to which he replied, the concept should not be one that suits only certain quarters.

He said there should be a rethink on globalisation if it means only things like cross-border flight of short-term capital.

"What about movement of people?" he asked. There are billions of jobless