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Keeping sea lanes, airspace safe

ranjit Singh; Marharlim Abbas; Sam Cheong; Azrani Rustam; K. Bala
PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday called for a refined regional security structure that implores nations to forget World War Two brutalities and compels weapon manufacturers to convert their technology from "killing mode" to keeping sea lanes and air space free of piracy and hijackings.

Dr Mahathir's idea of a new security concept parallels that of Malaysia's "prosper thy neighbour" policy - a clear and definite structure that saves tremendous resources, minimises unnecessary duplication and at the same time fosters closer co-operation among nations.

His concept also calls for China and Japan to work together to help ensure peace and stability in the region, "something that will not only reduce wasteful expenditure on arms but will enhance intra-regional trade and investments".

"I believe it would help if research into peacekeeping needs focuses not on military conflicts between nations but on better search and rescue equipment and drills, cross-border fire fighting, how to rescue hostages of hijackings and piracy, and making transportation of goods and passengers safer.

"We already have enough sophisticated weapons of destruction to wipe out millions and destroy this planet. What we need now is equipment which can make life safer for everyone, especially when they travel," he said when opening the Lima '99 International Conferences at Porto Malai.

Taking into account the similar cultures and values among Southeast Asian countries, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia participated in the peacekeeping process in East Timor.

"Whether we or they like it or not, they (East Timor) will be our neighbour," he said, adding that the peacekeeping force was not intended to interfere in another country's affairs or to show military might.

He warned that any attempt by any country to demonstrate its military might by actively supporting or undermining the political or economic well-being of another nation "is something to be deplored".

Dr Mahathir also raised the spectre of rogue currency speculators and hedge funds imposing a negative impact on a nation's economy and security, alluding to the riots in Indonesia.

He also condemned the International Monetary Fund's lack of inclination to stop currency traders from making huge profits or render them transparent.

"(Outgoing IMF managing director Michel) Camdessus promised us," he said, "but he did nothing."

Dr Mahathir was upbeat about the Asean region, saying it was set to boom again.

"We will ensure security for the region and we will prosper each other. We have learnt a lot from the recent currency and economic turmoil and we have emerged wiser and stronger. We believe we can help prosper not only each other but also our partners from other parts of the world."

In a dialogue with participants which included senior naval officers from various countries and weapons manufacturers, Dr Mahathir, elaborating on his proposed security structure, said it was not time yet for the region to subscribe to a standard security and economic co-operation.

But it was time, he said, countries stopped harping on the issue of Japan apologising for atrocities committed 50 years ago.

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