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Asia must assert itself, says Dr M

Hardev Kaur in Tokyo

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says Asia's future depends on Asians who can make it great.

He said Asia can even contribute and be the engine of growth, pulling along with it Africa, Latin America and the former Eastern Bloc countries.

This will not happen if it passively waits for it to happen, he said, adding that Asia must assert itself.

"It must not follow. It must work together with Europe and America. It must give voice to its views. It must demand respect."

"Provided Asia is prepared to do this, the future of Asia will be bright. There will be great countries in Asia again. Asian inventiveness, Asian industries, Asian management skills and Asian governance will provide the models for the world," he said.

Dr Mahathir said this in his address at the sixth Nikkei Conference on the "Future of Asia - Asia's Resurgence for the New Millennium" in Tokyo's Imperial Hotel.

In a speech to a packed hall of senior Japanese and foreign businessmen and many Asian leaders, Dr Mahathir said Asia was old in experience and it has shown that it can master everything that is modern.

"We will not dominate it but we certainly will not be bullied. Indeed, Asia can be an equal partner with the other groupings in the world, the European Union and Nafta."

He urged Asians to begin with the International Financial Regime. If the Western countries do not accept suggestions or reforms of Asians "then throw the whole thing back to them".

In a hard hitting no nonsense speech he told the audience: "Since they have ganged up on us, we should at least form our own forum, the East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC), so we may at least discuss with each other and find out what kind of a deal we are getting and how to protect ourselves."

He urged Asians to learn from history and look at all the new ideas with a degree of suspicion, to accept them only after careful study and debate, to test them and to modify or reject them if the results are not as promised.

In Western countries if the goods are not as promised one can sue for millions of dollars. But "... we cannot sue anyone if the theories, policies and ideologies which are sold to us by the Western ideologues turn sour and destroy our lives".

"So look at the gift horse in the mouth. Reject them if they are even slightly defective. Don't be afraid to send them back and ask for compensation if you find them not up to standard or defective."

He urged Asians not to be too fanatical about economic theories as much as they should not be fanatical about interpretations of religion. They must be prepared to examine the theories and their performance. And if the results are not what were promised "we should be ready to jettison them. We cannot wait too long".

He cited the example of communist countries which waited too long even when they saw the "bad results early" but upheld the theory since it was good.

"By the time they came to their senses the damage was practically irreparable".

On the Information Age, globalisation, the borderless world,

deregulation, liberalisation and transparency, human rights and democracy he said: "We should not make the mistake of being fanatics about any of these ideas and theories".

He stressed on the need "to examine them, to think through, to keep focused on the purpose and objectives and not on the means".

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