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Be sensitive, Europe told (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today urged Europe to be sensitive to Southeast Asia's concerns and be willing to transfer technology at nominal cost.

He said technology transfers were very costly for Southeast Asian nations, given that the rich have succeeded in making copying or "reverse engineering" a crime.

"It is not that we are prone to criminal acts but when the price difference is too great, it is difficult to stop people from breaching copyright laws," he said about software copyright breaches.

He agreed that countries should rigorously enforce intellectual property rights laws but the copyright holders should also reduce cost in order to make copying unprofitable. He also noted that technology has only a short shelf life.

"The point is technologies should not cost too much," he said at the Europe-Asia Business Summit 2000 organised by Kumpulan Utusan, HIS Malaysia and Global Panel.

Dr Mahathir also urged Europe to appreciate Asia's fears about Internet-based businesses and help find mutually beneficial ways of doing dotcom business.

He said Internet businesses, based in Western countries, could be beneficial but they could also throw locals out of business especially importers, distributors and retailers who could become redundant.

People could lose their jobs and the Government would not be able to collect corporate and import taxes.

"Our European friends must appreciate our fears ... more than that, they must be prepared to work with Southeast Asians to ensure that benefits are fairly shared and that a win-win result becomes possible," he said.

He said with their tradition of innovation, it would be the Europeans who would find new ways to do business on the Internet, some of which may be damaging to Asians.

In a lighter vein, he said that Asians had, at one time, been more creative than Europeans as it was Asians who discovered things like explosives and paper.

"But we stopped there. We did not develop the application of explosives for killing more efficiently and for rockets to the moon.

"We are happy enough to make firecrackers to chase away ghosts, which seem to prefer Asians for haunting," he said to laughter.

Dr Mahathir said European companies should become a strategic partner to Asians who would in turn prosper them when they became good markets for European goods, adding "poor people make poor customers."

Dr Mahathir said Southeast Asian nations now also had to compete with each other for foreign investments and had to forgo rights and revenues to beat "our friendly competitors".

"The result is very minimal benefits for us," he said.

Dr Mahathir said European and Southeast Asian businessmen have already entered into a new phase in their relationship as there was an increasing foray of the latter into Europe. He said there were obviously many opportunities in the re-shaped ties, adding that the cultural context was still important despite the advent of a world without borders.

"We are still people, human beings. We have our cultures, our loyalties and our very human feelings. When doing business, we cannot ignore these

factors.

"If we do, business between the peoples of the two regions will not last for very long," he said.

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