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Dr M calls for closer Asean-Japan relations

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has called for greater Japan-Asean relations to help Malaysia and other countries in the region meet the challenges of the knowledge-based economy head-on.

He said among the critical areas where Japan could strengthen ties with the region include opening up its market to more Asean products, establishing more joint ventures with Asean partners, and human resources development.

"For the regional emerging economies, there is a great need for Japan to open its doors wider to absorb more products from South-East Asia. As Asia's leading economy, we look to Japan to assume a natural leading role by facilitating our access to its market," Dr Mahathir said.

Speaking at the Kankeiren Asean Management Seminar in Kuala Lumpur yesterday, he said it is understandable that as Japan faced its own economic problems in the last decade, it was unable to be an engine of growth for the regional economies by increasing imports from Asean.

"However, we hope that with its economy demonstrating concrete signs of recovery, Japanese companies will assist the South-East Asian manufacturers by increasing imports into the Japanese market," Dr Mahathir added.

At a press conference later, the Prime Minister said most of Malaysia's exports to Japan comprise products made by Japanese firms located in Malaysia.

"Therefore, their benefits do not accrue very much to us. We would like to have some products produced by local people to also benefit from the Japanese market," he added.

Kankeiren or the Kansai Economy Federation, a private non-profit organisation comprising 850 major corporations, represents the Kansai business community. It's research organisation is known as the Pacific Research Exchange Centre or PREX.

Dr Mahathir said although many Japanese small- and medium-enterprises (SMEs) have already come to the region, many more are still needed to help budding SMEs in the Asean countries enhance their capacity building through skills training and technology transfer.

He said Kankeiren could encourage more Japanese SMEs to assist those in South-East Asia by setting up joint ventures with Asean partners.

"With globalisation and the information technology underway, emerging economies have to meet the great need for capacity building in terms of human resources. The challenge of K-Economy confronting the Malaysian and other Asean economies must be met head-on if we are to remain competitive," Dr Mahathir said.

He said it will be necessary to provide training to not just top management, but also mid-level and lower level knowledge-skilled personnel.

"It is only when we succeed in systematically upgrading the quality of our labour can we attain higher economic productivity. Kankeiren and PREX can indeed play a positive role in helping transform the Asean economies into knowledge-propelled economies," Dr Mahathir said.

Earlier, Kankeiren chairman Mr Yoshihisa Akiyama, commended Malaysia and other Asean countries for their rapid economic recovery following the regional financial crisis.

He said such quick recovery is due not only to timely policies by the

respective governments, but also the contribution of their human resources.

The seminar hopes to develop among Asean managers the entrepreneurial spirit and necessary skills to face the challenges ahead.

The theme of the seminar is "Human Resources Development in the 21st Century - contributing to the sustainable development of Asean countries and strengthening Asean-Japan relationship". It is organised by Kankeiren, and supported by the Association for Overseas Technical Scholarships and the International Trade and Industry of Japan.

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