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Dr M urges Asean to spell out pre-conditions

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday called on Asean economies to make clear their pre-conditions for embracing globalisation, liberalisation, and the trend towards mega-mergers.

Describing these three issues as the keys towards achieving the goals of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean), he said Asean's response to them should be driven by rationality, the imperative of freedom and independence, and the demands of ethics, morality and responsibility.

"There is a lot that is good about globalisation. It provides us many opportunities. We are not selfish. We do not mind others getting the opportunities also. But we must ensure that the opportunities and the benefits accrue to us as substantially as they do to others," Dr Mahathir said.

The Prime Minister said this in his keynote address at the Asean Business Summit 2000 in Kuala Lumpur yesterday. His speech was read out by Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

"Before we say yes to it (globalisation), we should say: No globalisation without benefit, no globalisation without self-determination, and no globalisation without corporate responsibility or conscience," he said.

Dr Mahathir said he cannot accept the "free market" doctrine that Governments should allow business to do whatever they like.

"If bones are crushed and lives are ruined, it's OK. It's too bad. It is simply the market ... the god that can do no wrong, that can be expected to perform better and to produce better results than anything that individual human beings either in business or public life can do," he said.

Dr Mahathir said based on the same pre-conditions, developing countries cannot rush headlong to liberalise their markets simply because Western experts say it is good for them, without considering the issues of equity and distribution, balance and fairness.

"I apologise to those who say: 'Go for the so-called big bang' even if it blows up in your face. I apologise to the eager beavers who say: 'Proceed to the cutting edge' even if you are cut to bits. I apologise to those experts who say: 'Just hold the good book, close your eyes and jump', even if it is in the dark of night and the hole is bottomless. Don't worry. Just keep the faith."

Dr Mahathir said it is clear that for most countries in the world the benefits of international liberalisation are still unclear.

"We in Malaysia must not forget that whilst massive foreign direct investment did come to Malaysia in 1999, last year only 1.2 per cent of global FDI was destined for the whole of the African continent. We received several times more than all the 30 countries of Africa put together," he said.

Dr Mahathir added two more imperatives to liberalisation: No international liberalisation without regulation, and no international liberalisation without representation.

"Who wants a brave new world without rules, where businesses are free to do as they please, where like 007, they have a licence to kill? Why do they want such a brave new world beyond their borders when they would never consider unfettered, unregulated markets and complete anarchy at

home?

"As for no liberalisation without representation ... if the physical life and death of our people, not merely their welfare, are at stake, why is there such a strong fight to prevent democracy, to ensure against democratic representation?"

"Why are we not allowed to have a say? Can we, should we, accept a world where the rules by which we must live or die shall be unilaterally determined?" he asked.

On global mega-mergers, Dr Mahathir said the world media has lauded them as "the next best thing to motherhood and apple pie" and good for equity investors.

"These global mega-mergers may be great for others. But the question has to be asked: Is it good for us? The biggest conglomerates in Asean are as ants in comparison with these elephants," he said.

Dr Mahathir said it is interesting that although every market guru and theologian "can easily refer to the evils of oligopoly and monopoly in the free market bible, the free market priesthood is silent or even enthusiastic" with regards to these mega-mergers.

Earlier, he called on Asean to work towards realising its Vision 2020 of "a community of South-East Asian nations, outward looking, living in peace, stability and prosperity, bonded together in partnership in dynamic development and in a community of caring societies".

"Now is the time not of words. Now is the time for action. The need of the hour is not for new formulation and concepts. The need is for transforming of our brilliant vision into palpable reality," Dr Mahathir said.

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