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Dr Mahathir: Let's revitalise region the 'Asian Way'

Abdul Razak Ahmad; Deborah Loh

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Lashing out at critics pressing for reform at the expense of growth, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has urged Asian countries to revitalise the region through an alternative method - the "Asian Way".

The Prime Minister said the much touted reforms, such as in the banking sector and best practices, were futile if they "strangled" growth.

"This is like putting the horse before the cart," he told participants of the Polmet 2000 conference on "Sustainable Urban Development In the New Millennium" today.

Dr Mahathir stressed the need to adopt an alternative method for achieving sustainable growth because Asia, he said, could not afford to depend solely on outside help for development.

"Most of our initiatives will have to come from within us, using our own ingenuity, wisdom, available resources, regional co-operation and a lot of hard work," he added.

The Prime Minister said an alternative method was for Asian countries to galvanise shared "Asian" values in developing and revitalising the region.

Dr Mahathir outlined the definition of these values: "What I mean by Asian values is an absence of extreme individualism, a sense of responsibility for the community, a belief in strong families, a reverence for education, frugality, hard work, national team work, a social contract between the people and the state, moral wholesomeness, a free but responsible Press, a belief in citizens as stakeholders and last but not least, respect for the environment."

The Prime Minister said that a uniform method for Asian countries to achieve sustainable growth was neither possible nor desirable.

"Sustainable development needs to be applied gradually in accordance with the ability of individual countries to cope, and with what each country perceives as appropriate."

Dr Mahathir said the widening gap in the usage of resources between developing and industrial nations was the earth's main environmental and developmental problem.

He said that with many developing countries now possessing lower per capita incomes than when the decade began, rising poverty and unemployment have increased pressure on environmental resources, "as more people have been forced to rely more directly upon them".

The Prime Minister said although Malaysia was not as severely affected by these inequalities as other developing countries, "there is a great deal still to be done in our country if we are to respond properly to the challenges presented by sustainable development".

Outlining Malaysia's local initiatives to maintain sustainable growth, Dr Mahathir said it included provision of adequate and affordable housing and for local authorities to develop and implement policies for sustainable development.

The success of these local initiatives, said the Prime Minister, was crucial. He added that since "people need to witness change at a local level", the partnership concept between Government, the private sector and local communities was critical.

"Many non-governmental organisations are also involved in action at the local level.

"On the environmental front they include groups concerned with practical

conservation, preservation of historic buildings and sites.

"Housing associations and the private sector have become increasingly involved in the provision of low-cost accommodation," Dr Mahathir said. However, Dr Mahathir added that the success of these local initiatives by Malaysia and other regional countries required not only a period of economic growth, "but also an assurance that the poor get their fair share of the resources required to sustain growth".

As such, Dr Mahathir said reforms were needed at the international level to allow the world economy to stimulate the growth of developing countries while giving greater weight to other important concerns such as the environment.

He said that for developing countries to grow, a lot more had to be done in terms of technology transfer, foreign direct investment and better terms of trade.

Together with a new international financial regime, these will enable the countries to grow fast enough to overcome their internal problems, he added.

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