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Mahathir-Satisfaction

DR MAHATHIR SATISFIED WITH ASEAN INFORMAL SUMMIT

By: Abdul Rahman Ahmad

SINGAPORE, Nov 25 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today that the just-concluded Fourth Asean Informal Summit was a very good meeting because for the first time member countries focused on things they can do.

The prime minister said he was satisfied with the meeting and the leaders had given their commitment to make sure everything they agreed on would follow through.

"It's a very good meeting...for the first time we focused on things we can do and not on non-substantive matters," he told reporters at the end of the summit.

Besides the summit, the 10 Asean leaders also held meetings with their summit dialogue partners.

Among the results of the meeting are flexibility on tariff cuts under AFTA's Common Effective Preferential Tariff Scheme and the adoption of the e-economy.

Asean leaders also proposed the formalisation of the Asean Plus Three into one entity and ensuring a stronger footing of the regional grouping.

On the proposed formalisation of the Asean+3 into an entity, Dr Mahathir said the idea was to balance the development in other parts of the world.

"The European Union and the North America Free Trade Agreement are other communities. It will not do to have without some grouping that is capable of arguing its causes," he said.

He said this when asked whether he felt vindicated with the idea of setting up of an East Asian summit which is similar to the East Asian Caucus he proposed some 10 years ago but which has yet to be implemented.

He said the leaders proposed the so-called grouping or caucus or community because they realised that they were quite vulnerable, even the big countries.

After the financial crisis, the people began to think that it could really upset the economies of many countries in East Asia while the West gained a lot from this crisis, he said.

Dr Mahathir also said closer cooperation between Asean and its summit dialogue partners was good because it could be extended to economic, agriculture and political fields.

He said there was a possibility of creating free trade but that would not happen any time soon because they needed to identify the problems of the participants to ensure such arrangements would not affect the less developed member countries.

Dr Mahathir also said the proposed East Asian summit would not overshadow Asean but would enhance Asean's role in the East Asian economies.

Dr Mahathir was also asked on the Malaysia initiated Trans-Asian railway project linking Singapore through Kunming, China.

"Let's be frank about it. This is an infrastructure project; a public utility, and in the past we did not even think of any returns on such investment.

"Where financing is concerned, countries like Cambodia is eligible for concessionary loans or aids. If this happens, the cost can be brought down and the thing can be made feasible," he said.

He said the leaders had identified the "missing link" of the track,

which is from "Thailand-Cambodia" and "Cambodia-Vietnam."

To a question on e-Asean, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would find ways to contribute ideas to make it a success.

On Singapore's free trade agreement with individual countries, Dr Mahathir said Asean would have to examine indepth how it would affect the regional member countries.

"If it means goods coming into Singapore then go into other Asean countries and it is free of tax, then it is a no-go thing," he said.

However, if it would not affect member countries, Asean was willing to go along with it, he said.

-- BERNAMA

ARA YBY