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Japan must be the engine and voice of Asia

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IT IS welcoming news that Japan's new Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori will not change the Asia-friendly policy of his predecessor and continue to accord importance to the region. Indeed he said: "I am determined to do my utmost for Asia's stability and prosperity in the 21st Century."

The role of Japan, the second largest economy in the world, in Asia is important. Even though it has been chided for not taking a more forceful role commensurate with its economic power, Japan continues to be looked upon as a leader in the region. It is after all the only Asian member of the elite club of developed nations - the Group of Seven (G-7).

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has on numerous occasions urged Japan to assert itself. The region needs Japan's ideas and leadership now just as the region and the world benefited from its earlier strategies and technological advances.

Thus all eyes and ears are on Japan as it plays host to the summit of developed nations in Okinawa next month. Asia hopes Japan will voice the region's concerns and act to safeguard its interests. The meeting of the Group of Eight (G-8), the first to be held in Asia in seven years, will, according to Mori, take "stock of the 20th Century and look ahead to the 21st Century".

There is much in Asia that needs to be considered. The recent crisis has shown up the weaknesses of the international financial architecture and the inability of the existing institutions to deal with the destabilising currency flows and the destructive hedge funds and speculators.

Then again, the actions and decisions of a small number of developed countries affect the many developing countries which do not even have a say at these meetings. In addition, their concerns are not heard. It is hoped that Japan will be more than just the "voice of Asia" in Okinawa from July 21 to 23.

Promising to focus on "regional cooperation in Asia", Mori said he wants the Okinawa Summit "to deliver a positive message which would fill the people around the world with hope that the 21st Century will be an age of greater prosperity, deeper peace of mind, and greater world stability for all, and that it will be a bright century for Asia as well".

Even as there are clear trends towards regional integration in the Americas and Europe, Asia too needs to "nourish new momentum for regional cooperation". The move for the region to cooperate with the setting up of an Asian Monetary Fund (AMF) was vehemently criticised and its formation knocked down by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and Washington.

A facility such as the AMF is urgently needed in the region as has been demonstrated by the recent crisis and the handling of it by the multilateral lending institutions which made the situation even worse than it should have been.

It is hoped that Japan will articulate this during the Okinawa Summit and explain to other developed leaders that Asia has no intention of undermining any organisation, institution or country. The region is merely, and rightly so, concerned with the welfare of its own region and people. A stable and prosperous Asia will benefit not only the region but also the world.

Japan's role in the region is vital. It must take the lead instead of holding itself back and apologising for what happened more than 50 years ago. Everyone makes mistakes but one must not be held hostage by past

mistakes. The West does not apologise for its mistakes and wrong policies. It is time Asians stood up and demanded for their rightful place on the world stage.

Thus, it is heartening to hear Mori say that he would like to see Japan play the "fly half of Asia" role. Mori used to play the "fly half" in his rugby team. The job of the "fly half", he explained, is to bring out the best of the varied mix of talent in the team to win the game.

Similarly, in Asia, where diversity is its biggest asset, Japan needs to bring out the best of the wisdom and creative mind of each Asian country to yield brilliant achievements on the global stage.

Japan must act besides being the voice of Asia. Japan is a leader in more ways than it cares to acknowledge. Its technological advancements and economic development have been recognised the world over. It must be the Asian engine and pull the other countries in the region along with it.

Mori told a Nikkei conference on the "Future of Asia" that regional economic disparity is a potential obstacle to closer regional cooperation, and a problem that is becoming increasingly serious as globalisation progresses.

The widening economic disparity in Asia needs to be addressed. Dr Mahathir has often stressed the need to "prosper thy neighbour". Prosperity brings along with it stability just as poverty gives rise to numerous other problems. Developed countries must bear this in mind and not impoverish developing countries further with their self-centred policies without due regard to the impact of these on the rest of the world, and especially the poor.

Japan, on its part, is committed to reinforcing cooperation in human resources development and exchange, trade and investment, financial cooperation for currency stabilisation, and information and telecommunications.

Mori outlined a "package of comprehensive assistance measures comprising four pillars:

- \* Intellectual assistance for policy formulation and institution building while promoting awareness that information technology (IT) holds opportunities for developing and developed countries.

- \* Assistance for human resources development, focusing on training and education.

- \* Assistance for building infrastructure and networks for information and telecommunications.

- \* Promotion of utilisation of IT through development aid. The next step is to implement these measures.

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