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Leaders to reinforce partnership

Nuraina Samad in Seoul

LEADERS of 10 Asian and 15 European countries began deliberations at the third Asia-Europe Meeting yesterday to chart the path for a reinforced partnership in politics, the economy and culture in the 21st century.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad joins his counterparts for the two-day meeting during which three documents will be adopted.

They are on the Seoul Declaration for Peace on the Korean Peninsular, Asia-Europe Co-operative Framework 2000 (AECF 2000) and the chairman's statement which all encompass the future direction for further promotion of growth and co-operation.

South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung set the tone in his opening address, expressing the hope that the third Asem or Asem III would lay "a solid cornerstone for the new Asia-Europe partnership for prosperity and stability in the new millennium".

Kim, who is this year's Nobel Peace Prize recipient, spoke with deep hope and enthusiasm that the efforts and dedication from leaders of both continents would not only lead to prosperity and more friendly exchanges among member countries but also to the peace and well-being of all people in the world.

Kim, whose country is experiencing the most crucial time in its history with the melting of the "icy Cold War wall" with North Korea, said although conflicts are continuing in some places around the world, "reconciliation and co-operation" are the common desires of all peoples "that will never fade".

For South Korea, Asem III could not have been more significant as it is the first in this millennium.

"I am filled with special emotion ... this is a great festive occasion," Kim said.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in his opening address, said in an interdependent world, it was obvious and rational that countries should pool their energies and resources to meet the challenges of today.

He said Europe and Asia had a mutual purpose to build prosperity because "prosperous people are more likely to be content and peaceful".

"To bring harmony and understanding across cultures, religions and ethnic divides, because as some of the ideological battles of the 20th century fade, we need in the 21st century to prevent fundamentalism of one kind being replaced by fundamentalism of another."

Blair said the task of providing stability and sense of order in the world so that peace and prosperity could be achieved was big.

"Yet I am an optimist. The very fact of this meeting is cause for optimism," he added and quoted a part of Kim's Prison Writings which touched on the strength of truth and justice over the domination of evil.

Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, in his speech, spoke of a new emerging Asia today that has stronger economic fundamentals and an "even stronger commitment to engage actively with the world".

"Our message to you today is that we in Asia are here to do business - with Europe and beyond."

He also warned of the minus side of globalisation and information technology which has further marginalised some economies (globalisation) and impeded development and integration in some (Information Technology).

Closer economic linkages between Asia and Europe can help both regions to face common problems of the new millennium.

If Asia and Europe succeed, the two continents would have created a more dynamic and more, productive partnership that would "be both enduring and rewarding for all countries and people".

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