

28 OCT 2000

Mahathir-Asia

MAHATHIR CALLS ON ASIANS TO BE TRULY FREE AND WORLD EQUALS

By: Tham Choy Lin

HONG KONG, Oct 28 (Bernama) -- Malaysia's Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad tonight made a clarion call to Asia, urging nations of the vast continent to make themselves truly free and stand as equals with Western developed countries.

The Malaysian leader said the long-term goal for all Asian countries was to be "subservient to no one" and Asians must have pride in their values and ways, and resist attempts by the West to force their ideologies on them.

"Asia and Asians must be free, truly free. No one should impose their values or ideologies or system on Asia," said Dr Mahathir who was invited to deliver a keynote address on "Agenda For A New Asia" at a gala dinner of the Asia Society held at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre.

"There is no reason why we should believe that what is being propagated by the West now - liberal democracy, free markets, borderless world etc would do any better in the long run.

"The day can still come when the West will reject their present values and ideologies because of the harm they suffer. Indeed, we must not blindly accept Western ways, ideologies and values without waiting for them to be tested extensively in the West," he added, pointing out that communism and socialism, both invented by the West, had retarded the development of many countries which had adopted them.

Dr Mahathir said Asian countries must take their places as equals in the world community and Asian values and ways must be accepted as legitimate, normal and inferior to no one.

Such an agenda was not fanciful or a dream but it would take a long time and would not be smooth sailing, said Dr Mahathir who has himself set Malaysia on the path to achieve First World status in the year 2020.

He said Asian ways were not bad simply because they differed from the West, and he drew attention to how Japan, South Korea and China had recovered very quickly from the effects of war and socialism.

Dr Mahathir said the more developed Asian countries should invest and help the less developed in the region.

And for this, an Asian Monetary Fund would be useful, he said, and an Asian Association for Development should be set up to enable countries to interact, discuss common problems and cooperation.

Dr Mahathir said Asians cannot come together the way Europeans do because of Asia's extreme diversity and the distances which separate its peoples.

"Asia must accept that it is a divided continent. Accepting this, it must plan its future as separate sub-continent, growing according to its special comparative advantages and at different paces," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the beginning of the new millennium had been dismal for Asia because the energy and spirit which had driven it in the second half of the 20th century had dissipated and the morality of Asian governments and the practices which had once made economic tigers of Asian countries were attacked by the West.

Rogue traders also saw the opportunity to attack the East Asian economic tigers and left them in unprecedented turmoil and sudden poverty.

"Even Japan, the most powerful of the East Asian economies, seems unable to come out of its economic malaise. In trying to Westernise its way of doing business and to adopt Western values, Japan has now become totally disoriented," said Dr Mahathir who advocated a "Look East" policy for Malaysia in the 80s to emulate the work practices of Japan and other East Asian states.

But Dr Mahathir said he had no doubt that Northeast Asia and Southeast

Asia can again achieve their previous development success if they regained faith in themselves.

He said the two regions have enough in common to cooperate on issues affecting them, maybe in the form of an economic group or an East Asian Monetary Fund.

"Southeast Asia can recover faster and more strongly if it is less preoccupied with gaining the approval of the West in the way it manages things politically and economically," he said.

Firm and strong governments must be allowed to rule and the idea that a country was undemocratic unless disruptive forces were allowed to threaten peace and stability must be rejected, he said.

Dr Mahathir also gave his views on how the other regions of Asia could move ahead.

South Asian countries, he said, can develop by themselves if they cannot do it together, and stressed that poverty eradication was far more important and less disruptive and damaging than the habitual premature unseating of elected governments.

For resource-rich but land-locked Central Asia, which was isolated from the world market because of distance, Dr Mahathir said it needed a vast and super network of railways to transport raw materials and goods across its vast expanse.

Turning to West Asia, he said it was important for them to reduce quarrels and subversion of each other and instead strive for capital intensive and high tech industries due to their under-populated state.

-- BERNAMA

TCL YBY