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Need for frequent meetings discussed

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says the need for more frequent meetings between South East Asia and North East Asia was discussed on the sidelines of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development.

He told the Malaysian press in Bangkok that co-operation between South East Asia and North East Asia is gathering support. This will enable the two regions to discuss matters of mutual interest and possible solutions to common problems.

The need for countries in the two regions to co-operate and discuss matters of common interest is deemed to be even more critical following the recent Asian financial crisis and the contagion which resulted in many countries being affected.

This could be something like the proposed East Asia Economic Caucus where common problems can first be discussed among members before being raised at other groupings and forums.

The Asean leaders met Japanese Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi and discussed the need to develop the Mekong Basin Development. Dr Mahathir explained that it is important especially for landlocked countries such as Laos to develop rail and water transportation.

Obuchi said that the Japanese Government would look into the matter. He said co-operation between Asean and Japan and the development of infrastructure in the Mekong Basin was a "major subject" discussed during their meeting.

Dr Mahathir also held bilateral discussions with Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, the representative of Morocco, UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the Director-General of the World Trade Organisation Mike Moore.

Abdurrahman extended an invitation for Dr Mahathir to visit his country during the discussions, to which the Prime Minister said he "accepted" and preparations will be made for it.

Bilateral issues relating to trade and investment were also raised while the Indonesian President briefed Dr Mahathir on the situation in Indonesia and said he believed that he "could resolve it".

Dr Mahathir said he welcomed this, adding "I think they can resolve the problem".

On his meeting with Chuan, the question of fishing in Malaysian waters was raised in addition to other bilateral matters. The Thais, according to Dr Mahathir, plan to send a delegation to Malaysia to negotiate fishing rights in Malaysian waters.

The Asean leaders also collectively met with Annan. This is the first such meeting of Asean leaders with the UN Secretary-General. Dr Mahathir said among the issues discussed was the recent Asian financial crisis.

Meanwhile, Obuchi said during his meeting with Asean leaders he had sought their views on matters of concern to the region. He said Japan, which will host the G-8 meeting later this year, hopes to act as a bridge between developed and developing countries and to raise their concerns at the meeting. Japan is the only Asian country which is member of the G-8.

"We will try to do our best in this. Industrial countries must take note of the concerns of developing countries and the access to their products in developed markets."

During the high level discussions on "The Institutional Response to the

Challenges of Globalisation", WTO's Moore said globalisation is nothing new adding that it has been with us ever since "the first man walked upright on this planet".

It is an evolutionary process and the challenge is how to engage those that have been left behind. The "victims" as he chose to call them have not benefited from the evolutionary process.

"The King and Queen of the world economy is knowledge. Information should be the greatest liberator," he said and hastened to add that the challenge is how to get access to the technology that "provides information such as the internet".

The director-general of the International Labour Organisation Juan Somavia disagreed with the statement that "globalisation cannot be changed" and that it was totally dependent on information and technology.

He argued that globalisation was much more than that and covered a whole spectrum including monetary, financial, trade and social policies. All these he pointed out "can be changed".

For example, he said, monetary policies can be changed to make them much more growth oriented which take into account the concerns of the poor and individuals.

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