

02 MAR 2000

Mahathir-Japan

OPEN YOUR DOORS WIDER, DR MAHATHIR URGES JAPAN

KUALA LUMPUR, March 2 (Bernama) -- Japan urgently needs to open its doors wider to absorb more Southeast Asian products to help regional economies recover, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said here today.

"As Asia's leading economy, we look to Japan to assume a natural leading role by facilitating our access to its market," he said.

Dr Mahathir said it was understandable that in the last decade of economic downturn, Japan was unable to be an engine of growth for the regional economies by increasing imports from Asean.

Nevertheless, he said, the region hoped that with the Japanese economy demonstrating concrete signs of recovery, their companies would assist Southeast Asian manufacturers by increasing imports into Japan's market.

The prime minister was addressing a four-day Asean management seminar-cum-2000 commemorative symposium jointly organised by the National Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Malaysia (NCCIM), Japan's Association for Overseas Technical Scholarship (AOTS) and Kansai Economic Federation (Kankeiren), and the Pacific Resource Exchange Centre (PREX).

The symposium aims to;

- * investigate and tackle Asean's human resource development problems;
- * discuss future human resources development to bring about sustainable development of Asean economies; and
- * further strengthen Asean-Japan ties.

Dr Mahathir said with globalisation and the information technology revolution underway, emerging economies have to meet the great need for capacity building in terms of human resources.

"The challenge of K-economy (knowledge-economy), which is driven overwhelmingly by information and technical know-how that confronts the nation and other Asean economies, must be met head-on if we are to remain competitive," he said.

These countries could only enhance their capability for value-added productivity with K-economy in place, he said.

"Hence, not only will it be necessary to provide training for top management, it will also be imperative to fill the huge gap in the availability of mid-level and lower level knowledge-skilled personnel.

"It is only when we succeed in systematically upgrading the quality of our labour can we attain higher economic productivity," Dr Mahathir said.

Kankeiren and PREX could play a positive role in assisting the Asean economies to transform into knowledge-propelled economies, he said.

Along with Japan's Official Development Assistance (ODA), the Japanese private sector also had long been involved in the development of the Asean economies, he said.

Dr Mahathir said: "As is well known, trade and investment by Japanese companies in Asean countries have increased enormously since Asean was established 33 years ago.

"Although many Japanese SMEs (small and medium enterprises) have already come into Southeast Asia, Asean feels that many more will still need to assist the budding SMEs in Malaysia, Thailand, Vietnam and other member countries to enhance their capacity-building to skills training and technology transfer," he said.

He said while PREX has conducted training programmes for SMEs, the Kankeiren could encourage more Japanese SMEs to assist those in Southeast

Asia by setting up joint ventures with Asean partners.

Dr Mahathir said: "These are critical areas where Japan can strengthen relationships with Asean countries."

The Kankeiren has about 850 major corporations and organisations in the Kansai region of Japan as its members.

The symposium, marking the 20th anniversary of Kankeiren's Asean management seminar, carried the theme "Human Resources Development In The 21st Century -- contributing to the sustainable development of Asean countries and strengthening Asean/Japan relationship."

It also featured a full-day satellite video-conferencing linking Bangkok, Osaka and Kuala Lumpur which Dr Mahathir described as a technological achievement and "truly a sign of the times."

Malaysia, the prime minister said, was pleased that the Kankeiren had chosen Kuala Lumpur as the venue for the commemorative symposium.

On a lighter note, he commented that: "Even though Osaka is one hour ahead of Kuala Lumpur and Bangkok is one hour behind us, you see how Kuala Lumpur is always agreeable to take the middle road, to playing the role as a balance in matters large or small."

-- BERNAMA

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