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WTO must be fair to all (HL)

Nuraina Samad in Seoul

SETTING the tone for the World Trade Organisation Trade Facilitation Conference to be held in Malaysia, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday the WTO must be "fair to all".

"Generally, we want the WTO to be fair to all sides, not just listen to one side," the Prime Minister told Malaysian journalists before returning home on the final day of the two-day Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem).

Asked about the conference, he said the WTO seemed to be concentrating on opening markets, reducing tariffs and other 'discriminatory conditions'.

"But we feel there is a need for weaker countries to preserve their economies because they have certain national needs."

Asked if Malaysia, as host of the conference, would put forward any proposal, Dr Mahathir said it had not been formulated.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar on Thursday said Kuala Lumpur would host the conference as part of a new round of multilateral trade negotiations aimed at ensuring that the interests of developing nations were not left out.

On Asia-Europe relations, Dr Mahathir said there should be more activities and exchanges between the people, in particular students, of both regions.

He said for such a relationship to be forged, "there must be more content and interaction" between Asia and Europe to make it "two-way, not one-way".

Dr Mahathir suggested more seminars be held for issues and problems to be discussed and for more young Europeans to study in Asian universities so that they could mix with Asian students.

He said until now, young Asians were the ones going to European universities, living there, mixing with the people and understanding their cultures and traditions.

"If we want to see a more meaningful relationship and one of mutual understanding, there is a need for European students to enrol in Asian universities, not only to study about Asia but also other disciplines which as we know are of equal standard (with European universities)."

Dr Mahathir, accompanied by his wife, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, was here for the two-day Asem summit.

Also with him were Syed Hamid, Foreign Ministry secretary-general Datuk Abdul Kadir Mohamad and Malaysian ambassador here Datuk V. Yogalingam.

Dr Mahathir also said Asem supported the efforts by South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung to establish relations with North Korea and to continue efforts to bring about peace in the Korean Peninsula.

Asked on Malaysia's stand on this, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had always had good relations with North Korea and had no problem with Kim's effort to establish relations with his northern neighbour.

Dr Mahathir was also asked on issues that were discussed in the meeting.

On globalisation, he said the question now was the form it would take.

On the deepening digital divide between countries, Dr Mahathir said this was a serious problem that put poor countries at a disadvantage.

"Obviously, the rich are more able to acquire the skill and knowledge. The poor, due to the lack of hardware and software, will be deprived."

Dr Mahathir also held bilateral talks on the sidelines of Asem yesterday with European Commission president Romano Prodi and Luxembourg Prime

Minister Jean-Claude Juncker.

Prodi had expressed the EU's desire to open an office in Kuala Lumpur but had said budget constraints prevented the move.

Prodi had also said there was a need for enhanced relations between Malaysia and the EU and was hopeful that the EU could be Malaysia's biggest trading partner. It now ranks third among Malaysia's trading partners.

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