

PM favours the creation of an Asian grouping

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It must be beyond regional entities, says Dr Mahathir

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. — Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad favours the setting up of a larger Asian grouping, one which would go beyond current regional entities and include all Asian nations.

Citing an example, he said it was his hope that Asean and India would be able to extract more out of New Delhi's dialogue partner status with the regional grouping.

He said this in an exclusive interview which appeared yesterday in the on-line edition of *The Hindu*, a national daily in India.

However, Dr Mahathir gave no commitment to supporting an Asean-India summit.

Asked about Malaysia's stand if India vied for a permanent seat on the UN Security Council, he said: "We have no position (on India's entry into the UN Security Council) except that we would go along with the general consensus of Asian countries... we would look at India as an Asian country. It must be Asians who decide."

In reply to another question, Dr Mahathir called upon India to show respect for all religions, including Islam.

"We regret, of course, if you destroy a mosque (a reference to the

demolition of the Babri Masjid). It is something that hurt our feelings, we cannot bring ourselves to say, well, let the mosque be destroyed... that will not be acceptable to our people," he said.

However, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was ready to work closely with India.

"It all depends on the political will of each country. As far as Malaysia is concerned, we have no problem.

"We have lots of people here of Indian origin, they are Malaysians, of course, but 10 per cent of them are of Indian origin," he said adding that this did not necessarily mean they viewed India as their homeland.

On the progress made by India in the IT sector, Dr Mahathir said, "We will need to work together with you. We will need some of the expertise. We will probably need your people also to work here (in Malaysia)."

Asked to comment on developments in the region, especially in Indonesia and the Philippines, Dr Mahathir said he was sad their economies were deliberately destabilised by rogue currency speculators.

"It is unfortunate because what

we saw was a very stable South East Asia for a long time. All the countries were growing economically, all of them doing rather well.

"But when you have a catastrophe deliberately caused by a currency devaluation, that of course has other effects... on the politics, on the economics of a country.

"It happened to us, it could happen to anyone. What we are seeing in South East Asia is the effect of a rather deliberate destabilisation of countries through economic means."

On his expectations of his successor when he leaves office, Dr Mahathir said he did not expect many changes as Malaysia's policies had not changed much since Independence in 1957.

"There will be changes, of course. No two persons can lead the same way."

Asked whether he was concerned over the reduced support for Umno as was seen in the recent general election, Dr Mahathir said, "Winning and losing support is the game of democracy".

He, however, expressed confidence that the party would be able to regain support.

□ Excerpts of interview on Pages 10 & 13