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ASEAN-MAHATHIR

CLEAR AGENDA FOR PROGRESS IN WTO

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN, Nov 5 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said there was a need to fix a very clear and precise agenda in order to have progress in the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

"We want to ensure that it is about trade and trade-related. Not with some political agenda," he told reporters after the end of the first-day of the Seventh Asean Leaders Summit.

He said there was a need to determine the agenda as there was a tendency to smuggle in all kinds of extraneous matters which would affect trade between countries.

He said extraneous issues which were always to the disadvantage of the developing countries should not be brought in.

When asked on what the issues were, he said, they included issues such as lack of human rights or child labour and "All of which is focused on the developing countries.

"Even if there is no human rights in developed countries, that is alright," he added.

He said these were the kind of things which side-tracked or derailed the whole grouping.

Asked of his stance during the Shanghai Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) that there should not be a new round of talks at the WTO in Doha this Friday unless there was a clear agenda, he said he maintained his stance.

He said if the agenda was made known, then it could be forwarded to have a new round of talk in the WTO.

"But to insist that if we don't (have this new round) then the economy of the world would collapse, I don't think there is any basis for that claim.

Even if we don't meet, we can still carry on as we are, But if we want to progress in WTO, then we need to fix the agenda very, very clearly and precisely," he added.

On the discussion among the leaders during the Summit, he said the leaders agreed for Asean to increase economic cooperation and trade and to help each other to develop.

He said there was also a need to exchange information on how to attract foreign investment and intra-Asean investment.

"We realise that too much dependence on one locomotive of growth, that is the US, is not very wise because when there is a downturn, we are all affected," he added.

He said Asean should diversify and the area to be focussed on would be the intra-Asean trade.

On the proposed set up of the Asean-China Free Trade Area (FTA), he said leaders were supportive of this concept but had yet to go into the details.

He said at times, even though there was an agreement of an FTA, its implementation might benefit only one side and Asean wanted to ensure that both sides could gain from this FTA.

This is because China is not only a big market, it is also a big producer of all kinds of manufactured products which are in direct competition to those being manufactured in South East Asia.

"We want to ensure that the influx of Chinese goods in South East Asia will not result in our own industries being shut down," he added.

As for the decision by leaders to set up an Asean + 3 Secretariat, he said the time had come for both parties to consolidate as Asean and its East Asian partners had been having dialogues for a long time.

He said the recommendation by the East Asian Vision Group (EAVG) that Asean should form an East Asian community was still too early.

But on the other hand, there is some urgency because of the need to increase trade between East Asian countries as well as a need for East Asian countries to stand together whenever there is a proposal that might be detrimental to the interest of South East Asia and East Asia.

"So if there is a Secretariat, it does not result in an East Asian community but it will bring the 13 countries closer together and identify areas where we need to make a common stance, where we need to debate and eventually to have a Summit between East Asian leaders", he added.

During the press conference, Dr Mahathir was also asked as to why he seemed not to be enthusiastic about an Asean-India Summit.

In reply, he said when forming a grouping there was a need to accept new members but if it continued to keep adding new members, the grouping itself would lose meaning.

"Our fear is that once we admit India, there will be others in South Asia who would want and insist that they should also be a partner", he added.

However, he said this problem had been resolved and Asean had now supported an Asean + India arrangement called Asean + 1. -- BERNAMA

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