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`Set up training schools in Asean countries'

Ashraf Abdullah

ASEAN leaders yesterday urged Japan to explore the possibility of setting up training and education institutions in various Asean countries to enhance human resource capabilities in the Southeast Asian region.

Speaking at the end of the Asean Summit here, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Japan had many highly skilled people who were not gainfully employed and should be used to conduct training courses.

"We suggested that Japan set up universities in Asean countries because the cost of sending students to Japan is very high.

"If they set up a university in Malaysia for example, they can take students from Asean countries. The cost will be much lower," he said.

Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi welcomed the proposal, Dr Mahathir said.

A statement issued by the Sultan of Brunei Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, who chaired the two-day meeting, said Asean leaders also expressed hope that Japan would continue offering study trips to high school students from Southeast Asian countries.

In the other Asean+China meeting, the leaders endorsed the proposal for a "Framework on Economic Co-operation" and to establish Asean-China Free Trade Area within 10 years with special and differential treatment and flexibility to the newer Asean members.

"The agreement should also provide for an 'early harvest' in which the list of products and services would be determined by mutual consultation. With the combined market of 1.7 billion people, an FTA between Asean and China would have a gross domestic product of US\$2 trillion (RM7.6 trillion) and two-way trade of US\$1.23 trillion," the statement said.

The leaders instructed their economic ministers to start negotiations as soon as possible.

Dr Mahathir also said Malaysia was willing to host the Asean seminar on terrorism which it had proposed.

"The details of the seminar have not been worked out. Obviously, it needs the involvement of all Asean countries. We are going to have a national-level seminar organised by Institute of Strategic and International Studies to crystallise the perception of terrorism. Then we can go to the Asean seminar and put forward our views."

Asked whether he had sent a letter to United States President George W. Bush urging him to stop the attacks on Afghanistan, Dr Mahathir said: "I have completed it and will send it when I get home."