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Mahathir-Asean

INVEST MORE IN POORER ASEAN COUNTRIES, SAYS DR MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 2 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said tonight the better-off Asean countries should invest more in the grouping's poorer members to further enhance economic and trade linkages between them.

"The potential for trade between Asean countries is still very great. We should focus on how to develop more trade between us.

"And if we can help the poorer members of Asean to prosper, we can then gain for us a bigger market. So we should invest in the poorer Asean countries," he said in an interview with four Asean journalists on the "In Conversation" programme aired over TV3 tonight.

Dr Mahathir fielded a range of questions on Asean including in the economic, political, security and international spheres.

To a question, he said Asean members should return to the idea of economic cooperation because it was this concept that was going to help them.

"Striking out on your own because you have certain advantages is not very constructive. In the end we will all suffer," he said.

Asean groups Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Laos, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Asked whether Asean would one day become an entity like the European Union (EU), Dr Mahathir said this was possible although it might take a long time, given Asean's varied cultures, religions, races and languages -- unlike the Europeans who are more homogenous.

"It is much more difficult for Asean to come together the way the Europeans have come together. So it will take a long time but people are beginning to know each other better, and I am hopeful that in the distant future there will be some kind of organisation along the lines of the EU," he said.

Dr Mahathir also said that he did not view the purchase of arms by some Asean countries as something amounting to an arms race.

"I don't consider it as an arms race. That is what the Press likes to talk about...It is these people who are selling arms who like to see an arms race because then they can sell their arms. We don't need the arms. We are not going to war with Thailand, the Philippines or Indonesia," he said.

Asked on the influence of the United States over Asean, the prime minister said every country would like to wield its influence but it was up to the grouping to exert its independence.

"If it is in our interest to go along with them, we should but if we find that it is against our interest, then we should resist. Every big country will want to influence other countries and if Asean as a group works together, we also can influence the US, China and Japan," he said.

On the emergence of China as a "superpower", Dr Mahathir said Beijing's spendings on arms did not mean that the country was going to be belligerent or that it had some ambition to conquer Southeast Asia, for example.

"It is just that it is a big country, a rich country and it must have the forces that commensurate with its capacity. We would have to live with that," he said.

He also said that China would also become a big market for Malaysian products as no country could produce everything for itself.

On the importance of leadership for a country's progress, Dr Mahathir said many were afraid that the leaders might become dictators if they

stayed on for too long.

"But if you give a leader too short a term, say just one term, there is really no time to do anything...So you cannot achieve much in one term or or even two terms.

"I've found that only after five years was I able to show some results from the initial planning and understanding of the situation," he said.

Dr Mahathir also said that the people had the right to determine whether or not a person should continue to be a leader.

"We should trust the people enough to make a decision on their own rather than legislatively limit the term of a president or a leader," he said.

Turning to the topic of globalisation, he reiterated that there was not just one interpretation of the concept, just like in the case of democracy.

Dr Mahathir said that to survive globalisation, there should be some regulations as opposed to total deregulation.

He said: "They are talking about the market governing itself, in fact the market would discipline governments. Market is about making profits. They are not interested in social work.

"We cannot have that. We have to regulate the market so that, for example, our stock market will not suddenly collapse when they pull out. We should have regulations that commensurate with the stage of development of the different countries."

-- BERNAMA

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