

07/11/2001

Leaders all for EAEG (HL)

Ashraf Abdullah

EAST Asian leaders expressed keenness yesterday about the formation of the Asean+3 Secretariat and the East Asian Economic Group, a proposal made by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad 11 years ago but met then with resistance from the United States and its Asian allies.

Speaking at the end of the two-day Asean Summit, which was followed by the Asean+3 and Asean+1 meetings here, Dr Mahathir said all 13 leaders were keen to set up the EAEG.

"In other words we will go back to the original proposal of the EAEG, this is the result of the study that was done by the East Asian Vision Group," he said at Istana Darut Taqwa before leaving for Kuala Lumpur.

Asean+3 groups all 10 Asean nations as well as Japan, China and South Korea.

Dr Mahathir first proposed the formation of EAEG in 1990, but was rejected by the United States because it felt that the grouping would eventually become an economic bloc like the European Community.

Japan, the US' biggest trading partner, took a similar stand, fearing economic repercussions as a result of the US opposition. South Korea had also opposed the idea.

The US rejected the idea even though Dr Mahathir had repeatedly said that the grouping would be an informal gathering to discuss ideas rather than an economic bloc.

Dr Mahathir went as far as re-naming the EAEG to East Asia Economic Caucus so that it would not be considered an economic bloc.

On whether the US Government would now agree to the formation of the EAEG when it had rejected it 11 years ago, Dr Mahathir said: "Well, that was under (ex-President Bill) Clinton administration. There is a new administration now under President (George W.) Bush and the objection may not be as strong as before.

"Previously, because of the US, both South Korea and Japan were very reluctant. Now, South Korea itself is pushing for this. South Korea mentioned specifically that since Europe has the European Union and the United States has the North American Free Trade Agreement, we in the region should have our own regional organisation."

An East Asian Vision Group, commissioned by the Asean+3 leaders two years ago, presented its report at the summit on Monday and proposed the formation of an East Asian Grouping. The group comprised two members from each of the 13 countries.

Asked whether the EAEG would be set up soon, Dr Mahathir said: "I think it is going to happen. (South Korean) President Kim Dae-jung, in particular, wanted the Asean+3 to become a proper EAEG and even proposed a summit of East Asian leaders."

Kim had said China, Japan and South Korea, which are strong economies, would contribute to the growth of Southeast Asia.

Dr Mahathir said the leaders also agreed to set up the Asean+3 Secretariat which would pave the way for the formation of the EAEG.

On the role of the secretariat, he said: "I think the secretariat will have to co-ordinate and focus on particular subjects ... for example if there is an international conference on trade we can meet to decide our position."

This, Dr Mahathir said would give East Asian nations a bigger voice at international forums.

