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PM: Japan must lead Asia (HL)

Syed Nadzri in Osaka, Japan

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has made a renewed plea to Japan to lead Asia in putting an end to the fight-to-the-death world economic concept advocated by the West.

He said Asia must put in place Governments which can protect the weak and afford them a chance to survive and prosper in the face of what he described as "unfettered predatory capitalism".

He said Malaysia and other countries in the region, were distressed because Japan was showing signs of failing and for more than a decade seemed unable to pull itself out of the recession.

But if Japan and the East Asian countries work together, they could come up with a model of co-operation for mutual good for the rest of the world.

Dr Mahathir was speaking at the Mainichi International Symposium at the Osaka International Convention Centre yesterday barely four hours after arriving here for a four-day working visit.

The symposium, organised by the Mainichi Shimbun with the theme "Kansai and Asia in the 21st Century - In Quest of Deeper and Wider Range of Exchanges", also had, among its speakers, Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan, South Korean ambassador to Japan Choi Sang-Yong and NTT West Japan president Taichi Sakaiya.

The slogan used during the conference, attended by businessmen in the Kansai region, was "Wake up Kansai" - sort of a clarion call for this area to the South West of Tokyo to stand up to the realities of Japanese economic development that was concentrated too much around Tokyo.

In his speech entitled Promoting Mutual Understanding Between Asia and Japan, Especially Kansai, Dr Mahathir noted that Japan had a history of copying the West, particularly the United States.

In doing so, he said, even Japanese youths want to be blondes, work less and play more - discarding in the process the traditional Japanese and Eastern culture of filial piety and discipline.

But, citing the walled-up US Embassy in Kuala Lumpur as a small example, he said the Americans have changed.

"They are no longer the liberators. They have become the dominators. It is sad to see the American Embassy in Kuala Lumpur surrounded by concrete walls now where before only the Russian and Chinese embassies have such walls.

"Why do so many people seem to want to do harm to the Americans? Whatever may be the reason, if they are so disliked, is it wise to copy them?" he asked.

The Prime Minister pointed out however that not everything American was bad because they were the ones who taught the Japanese to switch to producing high quality goods.

But looking at history, he said 50 years was a long time for Japan to be morally obliged to the US.

"While there are many things American which Japan needs to follow, there are also many which Japan should reject," he added.

Dr Mahathir said the pricing of goods, for example, was one of the American practices Japan did not follow. And this, plus high quality, produced an unbeatable formula which fuelled Japan's growth tremendously.

"Japan understands Asia better than the West, except when it chooses to listen to those people who do not understand Asians. Learn about us through your own news-gathering network.

"If you rely on existing news network, you will miss myriads of opportunities.

"If you get truthful reports, you will help create better understanding not only between you and us but also between East Asian and other Asian countries," he added.

The Prime Minister called on business organisations and local governments in the Kansai area to develop relations with countries in Asia and mentioned the silver-haired programme where elderly Japanese citizens could settle in other Asian countries as one of the areas that could be promoted.

In a panel discussion which followed, Dr Mahathir, answering a question relating to Kansai's role, said the province despite being smaller in potential and opportunities than Tokyo, was bigger economically.

Therefore, he added, Kansai should seize the opportunity to interact more and build its base abroad.

He said many companies from the Kansai region were already operating in Malaysia.

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