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Vajpayee calls for closer ties with Asean at summit level

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - India today called for closer ties with Asean at the summit level in an effort to enhance its alliance with Southeast Asian countries.

Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, representing the largest democracy in the world, said summit-level interactions between India and Asean would be of mutual benefit.

He said India had had positive co-operation with the European Union on a similar level.

"We can intensify our interaction and synchronise our actions in world fora. We can together form a formidable force working for global peace and security, equitable economic development and social justice," he said at the "India-Asean: Shared Perspectives" public lecture.

India has been pushing for an Asean-India Summit after becoming a full dialogue partner and participant of the Asean Regional Forum (ARF) in 1996.

In his speech this morning, Vajpayee voiced India's vision for a smart partnership with Asean in all the vital economic sectors.

"We seek a dialogue bilaterally and multilaterally with countries in the region to harmonise our positions on key issues of development, trade, investment and environment.

"It is an ambitious agenda but we have the collective strength to implement it. What we need is the political will and the highest-level commitment to a sincere, frank and comprehensive India-Asean dialogue," Vajpayee said.

Specifically suggesting an annual India-Asean summit which could act as an effective conductor between the two growing economies, he said that rather than competing, India and Asean could in fact complement each other.

Citing the advancements in the technological sector as a glaring example, he said: "Each of our countries has achieved expertise and even dominance in certain areas of technology. It is crucial that we should co-operate in exploiting the synergies between us, rather than duplicating capacities or undercutting each other."

Vajpayee also pointed out the need for greater co-operation to overcome the various transboundary problems facing India and Asean.

Stating poverty, energy, food shortage, population growth and incurable diseases as factors of deep concern, he called for a holistic approach in addressing these problems.

He said regional security issues were also very much inter-related between the two neighbouring region.

Contending that India and Asean were on the same side of the socio-economic divide of globalisation, Vajpayee said that the "weak" should not be neglected in the race for rapid globalisation.

He said that the 1997 regional economic crisis must serve as an eye-opener so that developing economies would not remain vulnerable to destabilisation or stagnation from a rush into globalisation.

Vajpayee also agreed with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's repeated call for reforms of the international financial structure.

Speaking on the last public engagement during his four-day working visit, Vajpayee stressed India's commitment towards what he described as a

common "vision".

"My Government stands ready to work towards the realisation of this vision."

Hours later, Vajpayee and his 135-member delegation left for home.

He was seen off at the KL International Airport by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

Also present were Deputy Information Minister Datuk Khalid Yunus, who was the minister-in-attendance and Indian High Commissioner to Malaysia Veena Sikri.

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