

'Asean successful despite flaws'

By WONG CHUN WAI

NEW DELHI: Asean has proven itself to be a successful regional grouping despite its numerous flaws, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

"There are today many cynics who find flaws in the entire Asean endeavour. God knows there are many flaws in Asean.

"Yet no one has ever said that Asean has not been a tremendous success in building a community of peace in what was once called a region in turmoil," he said.

The Prime Minister said strangers had turned into acquaintances while acquaintances had turned into comrades.

"Enemies have been turned into friends, not overnight but still quite surprisingly fast," he said at an Asean-India Business Summit luncheon here yesterday.

Dr Mahathir, who arrived here earlier from Hyderabad, is on the second day of his visit to India.

The inaugural Asean-India Business summit has attracted the participation of over 200 top chief executives and

business leaders.

Malaysia is India's largest trading partner within Asean.

India's trade with Asean has grown from US\$4.5bil (RM17.1bil) in 1995 to US\$9.2bil (RM34.9bil) in 2000.

Dr Mahathir admitted that the new Asean members were "not so chummy among themselves or with older members" but there was no doubt that no one in the region was preparing or even thinking of going to war against one another.

"A community of co-operative peace has been established," he said, adding that it was important for the rest of

Asia that India be part of the prosperity run.

Citing the successful models of China, Japan and South Korea with their own methods, Dr Mahathir said there was plenty of national pragmatism among countries in the region.

"We all did it according to the 'Sinatra Principle'. We all did it our way and the most important element was not the international system or the regional system, but the national pragmatism sans ideology," he added.

Dr Mahathir said countries could choose their friends but not their neighbours, adding

that there was a need for Asia to work together to shape the international economic system.

He said he was impressed by the posture taken by India at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and that India must continue to provide leadership on global economic issues.

Later, Dr Mahathir met Indian President A.P.J. Abdul Kalam and Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

The two prime ministers also witnessed the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the governments

of Malaysia and India on road development project in the state of Jharkhand.

Malaysian companies have completed US\$208mil (RM790mil) worth of projects in the road sector while another 27 projects worth US\$1.3bil (RM4.94bil) are on-going.

Dr Mahathir and the Malaysian delegation, which included Works Minister Datuk Seri S. Samy Vellu, also attended a state banquet.

The Prime Minister is scheduled to leave for a two-day visit to Islamabad today before heading to Saudi Arabia.