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MAHATHIR-ASEAN+3

MAHATHIR: ASEAN+3, PRELUDE TO EAEG'S FORMATION

TANJONG MALIM, Aug 10 (Bernama) -- Malaysia's proposal to host the Asean+3 Secretariat is a prelude to the proposed formation of the East Asia Economic Grouping comprising countries from North and South East Asia, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

On its own, almost all the South East Asian countries (Asean) were weak developing nations whose voice was not respected at international fora, he said.

On the other hand, he said the North East Asian countries comprising China, Japan and South Korea were much stronger and richer, and had a much better future potential than Asean countries.

"Kalau dicantumkan Asean dan tiga negara ini, kita akan jadi satu suara yang cukup kuat dan perlu dihormati (If Asean and these three countries are merged, we will speak with one strong voice and have to be respected)," he told reporters after attending a dialogue session with staff and students of Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris here.

Dr Mahathir, who is on a one-day day visit to Perak, said collectively the Asean+3 countries would also have a combined market of more than 1.5 billion consumers.

With such a large market, the industries in these countries as a group could grow as competitive as those in Europe and America, he added.

Given these strengths, Dr Mahathir said Asean+3 countries could balance the current economic and political might of the West.

In addition, these Asian countries would also be in a better position to ward off attempts to recolonise them through economic pressure such as those applied during the last Asian financial crisis, he said.

If not for Malaysia's strong financial position and economic fundamentals, he said it could have also fallen victim to the necessity of taking huge foreign loans at the expense of losing its economic sovereignty during the time of the crisis.

"Inilah pentingnya kita mencari kekuatan dengan bekerjasama dengan negara North East Asia yang lebih kuat. Negara-negara ini adalah negara Asia dan mereka faham tentang selok-belok dan budaya bangsa Asia (This is the significance of our seeking strength through co-operation with North East Asian countries which are stronger. These countries are Asian countries and they understand the ways and culture of Asians)," the prime minister said.

For that reason, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would press ahead for the Asean+3 Secretariat to be based in Kuala Lumpur despite the fact that idea was shot down at the recent Asean Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Brunei.

He disclosed that Malaysia's proposal for the secretariat was turned down because of envy and uneasiness ("tidak senang hati") among certain Asean countries.

"Ada pihak berkata kononnya dengan adanya sekretariat Asean+3 ini maka Sekretariat Asean (di Jakarta) akan diketepikan. Di kalangan negara-negara Asean juga ada rasa cemburu dan tidak senang hati (There are certain quarters who feel that with the establishment of the Asean+3 Secretariat, then the Asean Secretariat (in Jakarta) would be neglected. There are certain Asean countries which were envious and uneasy (about the establishment of the Asean+3 Secretariat)," Dr Mahathir said. -- BERNAMA

MAD SHY