

11 APR 2002

Mahathir-Asia

NO NEED TO BE SUSPICIOUS OF ASIA, SAYS DR MAHATHIR

PETALING JAYA, April 11 (Bernama) -- Malaysia does not understand the suspicious nature of countries from other regions towards Asian countries, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today.

"When Asian countries can only talk to each other in the presence of representatives from non-Asian groups with whom Asians have to compete, particularly when the representative is powerful, it is obvious that open discussion would be impossible.

"Anything that is discussed which is not in the interest of the non-Asian groups would be subjected to opposition or would be watered down so as to be less meaningful," he said at the 30th Annual Williamsburg Conference at a leading hotel here.

He said Malaysia is not anti-West or anti-Europeans and almost immediately after her independence, she had opened up the country to European investment.

Dr Mahathir also said it is wrong for the developed countries to reject the idea of the formation of an Asian organisation when European nations are allowed to form their own organisation like the European Union.

"It smacks of double standards. It is shameful that the countries of East Asia have to hide behind other names, like ASEAN plus three in order for them to get together," he said.

He said Asians are heterogeneous and deeply divided thus there is no way that they can conspire to confront the Europeans or the West.

Furthermore, Dr Mahathir said Asians know they need the rich countries of Europe and America in order to grow and prosper.

"Asians want to be democratic, to be equal and to be fair but they do not see good examples of these among the democrats who preach to them.

"It is undemocratic to use force including economic pressures in order to gain acceptance of a system or policy but force is being used every time to gain Asian compliance and many of the things that they have to accept are actually detrimental to their interest," he said.

He said the formation of Asean, after the failure of Maphilindo, a grouping consisting Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines in the 1960s, is an association of largely weak countries with little clout, helpless to influence the affairs of the region, much less the world.

To make the Asian grouping stronger, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia about a decade ago proposed a link-up with other Asian countries, namely the vigorous economies of Northeast Asia.

"It was not an economic community or union like the European Economic Community. It was merely going to be a consultative forum, to identify and discuss common problems and formulate common stands," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that although Europe was evolving into the European Union and the countries of North America had already formed NAFTA (North America Free Trade Area), the East Asia countries, north and south were told in no uncertain terms that they may not talk to each other except in the presence of countries from outside the region.

"Of course this condition was not spelt out in so many words. But potential members from the Northeast were verbally informed that they may not join the East Asian Economic Group (EAEG).

"Some members of the Southeast Asian Association were also influenced and obstacles were placed by them to prevent the formation of the EAEG. Even calling it East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) did not help," he said.

Dr Mahathir also hit out at the United States, saying that the superpower was always attaching conditions in exchange for aid or assistance.

"At one time the United States was the most popular country in the world because of the Peace Corps. Now there is no Peace Corps and no aid except when tied to the fulfillment of the policies of the donor," he said.

The Prime Minister said the slightest breach of the tenets of the donor would result in painful sanctions and other punitive measures which all contribute to more impoverishment.

"America has become ugly and American embassies everywhere must be built behind high walls," he added.

-- BERNAMA

SR HS ABG