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Mahathir-EAEG

PRESSURE BY FOREIGN POWERS ON EAEG HAS EASED, SAYS DR MAHATHIR

KUALA LUMPUR, May 24 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the pressure by foreign powers to include certain countries in the formation of the East Asian Economic Grouping (EAEG) has somewhat eased.

"So far, I've not heard anything," the prime minister said when asked whether the pressure was still continuing.

Speaking to reporters at the RMAF base in Subang on his return from a five-day visit to Japan and South Korea, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had maintained all this while that it was nothing wrong to establish EAEG because the North American continent had the North American Free Trade Area (Nafta) and Europe had its own bloc in the form of European Union (EU).

Dr Mahathir was also asked whether the new US administration under President George W. Bush had a different stand from the previous administration of former President Bill Clinton on EAEG.

"So far, there is evidence they are opposing EAEG," he said.

During his visit to Japan and South Korea, Dr Mahathir received support from Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and South Korean President Kim Dae-jung for the setting up of the "Asean+3" (Asean plus China, Japan and South Korea) Secretariat in Malaysia.

The secretariat will be a prelude to the formation of EAEG.

EAEG will be the culmination of Kuala Lumpur's perseverance in having a platform for East Asia to discuss common issues.

Dr Mahathir said there was very keen interest, especially from South Korea, to the setting up of Asean+3.

"President Kim Dae-jung firmly gave his opinion on the need to establish EAEG," he said.

Asked whether the change of stand by Japan which was initially hesitant to support EAEG due to opposition from the US, Dr Mahathir said: "You can make your own deduction. I don't cold feet or warm feet but that's entirely your opinion, not mine."

Asked whether the EAEG concept had become a reality, Dr Mahathir said it had not because the cooperation was still in the form of Asean+3.

Asked further when the proposed Asean+3 Secretariat to be set up in Malaysia would be a reality, Dr Mahathir said it depended on the agreement by Asean-member countries.

"Some countries did not make any declaration whether they supported or rejected EAEG. We only make an offer.

"If there are countries that do not agree with the secretariat being set up in Malaysia, it may look like there is a competition," he added.

-- BERNAMA

MAD MFJ TS