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Young leaders have a role in regional co-operation

KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Malaysia today urged young leaders in Asean to come together, interact and foster regional co-operation among young people.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said a lot of effort was being made to bring to reality East Asian regional co-operation.

"It is this that has taken the form of an Asean Plus Three (APT) process, involving the 10 Asean member countries and the three largest economies in the region - Japan, China and South Korea," he said after an hour-long closed-door meeting with some 30 young leaders of Asean member countries at the Young Leaders Programme, held in conjunction with the East Asia Economic Summit held in Petronas Tower 1.

"After listening to them (the young leaders), I feel there is a need for more interaction among young leaders in Asean member countries and for them to reach out to as many young people as possible.

"There is a need to foster regional cooperation and to involve the young people."

He said young people should be allowed to attend Asian leaders' meetings so that they could interact with them and create an environment which would be inspirational to them.

Abdullah said the setting up of a secretariat for APT would constitute another important step forward for East Asian regionalism.

"The setting up of the secretariat, a proposal by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, will enable the pursuance of various decisions taken at East Asia meetings."

He said the secretariat would also benefit those in the private sector through, probably, informal meetings on a regular basis.

"The APT involves a population six times that of the EU (European Union) and five times that of Nafta (North American Free Trade Agreement). Its GDP is already substantially bigger than the EU's and roughly equal to that of Nafta."

Given the relatively higher average East Asian growth rates, Abdullah said it was only a matter of years before its gross domestic product exceeds that of Nafta.

"An enterprise as ambitious and formidable as this would benefit greatly from a dedicated secretariat. Needless to add, such a secretariat should work closely with and complement the existing Asean secretariat and not undermine it."

The Asean secretariat, Abdullah said, would in fact benefit from being spared the burden of servicing the APT process, whose agenda would no doubt mount in the years ahead.

He said East Asian regionalism would also exert greater weight and influence in global affairs if the members regularise the habit of caucusing and conducting informal consultation in international forums.