

PM: Greater Asean integration feasible

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LANCKAWI: Asean countries should experiment with greater integration between neighbouring nations while working towards the Asean Free Trade Area (Afta), Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

The Prime Minister cited co-operation between Thailand and Malaysia in the border areas as an example.

"If it works, then the area designated can be enlarged," he said, adding that it was likely to work if there were mutual goodwill and sympathetic consideration.

In his keynote address at the opening of the Malaysia-Thailand Technology and Business Partnership Dialogue here yesterday, Dr Mahathir said there could be a degree of integration among the five southern Thai provinces and the northern Malaysian states of Kedah, Perlis and Kelantan.

"Even while this is happening, there can be enhanced co-operation between

Malaysia and Thailand over and above those identified in Afta," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the two countries' comparative advantage in designated border areas should be identified and offered to investors from both countries and to foreigners.

However, care should be taken to ensure minimal damage to local businesses and workers in both countries.

He said the European Union experience was a good guide for cross-border collaboration, adding that the introduction of the euro had caused a rise in the cost of living in the poorer members of the union.

Dr Mahathir said Asean was perhaps the most durable and viable grouping of developing countries in the world.

"We have not only stuck together through thick and thin but we have actually enlarged our group," he said.

On the dialogue, he said there would be practically no movement on the ground unless the participants went

back and explained the decisions and their importance to the implementers and bureaucrats.

"Even if we act and implement a small percentage of the resolutions and decision, they will be very significant. So let us put aside our suspicions of each other, seek areas of agreement, decide and then go back to implement the needed action.

"Within a given timeframe, we must present a report on what we have done," Dr Mahathir added.

About 350 people from Malaysia and Thailand are attending the two-day dialogue, which is jointly organised by the Malaysian Industry-Government Group for High Technology and the National Science and Technology Development Agency of Thailand.

The participants comprise key economic development officials and policymakers from various ministries, captains of industry, academic experts and entrepreneurs.