

Dr M: Express support for East Asian economic grouping

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KUALA LUMPUR: Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has called on East Asian countries to openly say they want to have an East Asian economic grouping and stop hiding behind the label of Asean Plus 3.

The Prime Minister said the govern-

ments of these countries should make such a declaration as Asean Plus 3 was in fact already an East Asian grouping.

He said when such a grouping was first proposed about 10 years ago, some quarters disapproved of the move.

"Because of this, we have been trying to reach that destination in a roundabout way.

"We got around this problem by having the Asean Plus 3 so that it won't ruffle any feathers," he said at a question-and-answer session at the First East Asia Congress here yesterday.

Dr Mahathir added that while the business community felt that such a regional grouping was good, the governments were constrained and said they should not come together.

"But this (grouping) is inevitable," he said, adding:

"The first concrete step to realise the grouping is for us to come out in the open and say we want an East Asian economic grouping.

"From then on, we can set up an institution, talk to each other, learn about each other's inhibitions and constraints and how to overcome them."

He said that this was how it was with the formation of Asean.

Dr Mahathir said that in working towards building peace and co-operation among the East Asian countries, the countries must look forward and not look back at the past.

He said past animosities should not

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be allowed to get in the way of this co-operation.

Citing an example, he said his home state Kedah was once invaded by the Thais and atrocities were said to have been committed.

"But I am looking to working with my good friend (Thai prime minister) Thaksin (Shinawatra). We look towards the future and not the past," he said.

He added that Japan might also have hang-ups about joining such a grouping for fear of being accused of trying to resuscitate the idea of a Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty Sphere, which they created during World War Two.

"Forget about it. In Malaysia, we have short memories," he said in jest.

Asked to explain how the idea of setting up the grouping was first mooted, Dr Mahathir said it was when the General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs (GATT) was felt to be going nowhere.

Calling GATT the "general agreement to talk and talk", he said there were so many rounds of talks that "we felt quite dizzy."

He said a smaller grouping would be more effective and so, it was logical for East Asia to have its own grouping, just as the North American Free Trade Agreement and the European Union were formed for the benefit of their members.

He added that Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) did not look after the interest of the East Asian countries, which were at times pushed back.

"Anyway, there is no harm in having an East Asian grouping even when we have Apec. We should not depend on Apec," he said.

The Prime Minister said the congress would give opportunity for East Asian countries to discuss an Asian Monetary Fund, China's role in building the grouping, trading regimes, health and education collaboration, tourism cooperation, labour migration, media contribution and institutions such as the Asean Plus 3.