

No regrets bringing Myanmar into Asean: Dr M

SUN - 9 OCT 2003

NUSA DUA (Bali): Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday he has no regrets bringing army-ruled Myanmar into Asean and urged the international community not to use sanctions to force Yangon to adopt democracy.

"No regrets," Mahathir told reporters yesterday when asked about his key role in backing Myanmar's membership in Asean in 1997 in Kuala Lumpur.

Mahathir had in July warned Myanmar that it could face expulsion from Asean if it continued to defy world pressure to release democracy activist

Aung San Suu Kyi.

He was speaking at the end of his last summit of Asean leaders. He is to retire at the end of this month.

Mahathir said the international community should be patient with democratic reforms in Myanmar, which is also facing ethnic tensions.

"People go through certain periods of difficulty and they have to react to these difficulties. We have to be patient," he said, rejecting suggestions that sanctions be used to pressure the junta.

"We don't believe in applying sanctions on a country that refuses or has

not been able to become a democracy," Mahathir said. "(It) will actually victimise the people of Myanmar rather than the government (and) will not do any good at all in solving the problem."

He said sanctions would starve the people and deprive them of medicine and "that is a cruel way of trying to spread an ideology".

Mahathir said the United States is known to be a leading democracy but noted that it is also "the only country which has dropped an atomic bomb".

Asean leaders at the meeting here avoided any public criticism of their fellow member - AFP