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MAHATHIR-APEC

AUSTRALIA CAN DO MORE TO IDENTIFY WITH ASIA

By: Siti Hawa Othman

BANGKOK, Oct 21 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says Australia can do more to identify itself with Asia.

"But Australia is playing with the idea of being the deputy sheriff (of the region) and that is not appreciated by Asian countries," he told a press conference at the conclusion of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) informal leader' summit here today.

Asian countries could not have a partner who was also a policeman trying to look over their affairs, he said in reply to a question on why Australia could not integrate itself into East Asia.

"We want equal partners, one that sees eye to eye with our perception of things. Not constantly advising us on what we have to do or should do and criticising our own system. (It) doesn't sound very Asian," Dr Mahathir said.

He said Asian countries did not go round teaching others how to run their countries.

When asked on his frequent misunderstanding with a succession of Australian prime ministers, Dr Mahathir said he did not start it first but they had made nasty comments about him by calling him a recalcitrant and had even condemned Malaysia's judicial system.

He said one should also take a look at their own background and temper it with humility.

To a question whether the US felt threatened with the growing influence of China, Dr Mahathir said the US could be concerned and was trying to make a comeback by interacting more with countries in East and Southeast Asia.

Dr Mahathir said that was the reason why U.S. President George W. Bush was visiting several countries in Asia.

Bush, he said, appeared to be accommodative and wanted to have a lot to do with countries in the Asia Pacific whose trade accounted for half the size of that of the world's total.

Asked whether East Asia would choose China or the US to lean on, he replied, "When people compete, others have the option to pick and choose to defect."

During the press conference, Dr Mahathir was also asked on the Myanmar issue in which he said that Asean was critical of Myanmar but was also aware of the latter's problems.

"That is why we did not call for liberal democracy where people can riot or bring down the government. We should have democracy but basic democracy where people have the right to choose the government without having to have a revolution," he said.

As for his earlier remarks of expelling Myanmar from Asean, he said that was as a last resort.

However, he said Asean had listened to Myanmar and felt that the country had made an attempt to move in the right direction.

"As such, we should not create problems for Myanmar by imposing sanctions," he said.

Asked to comment on the outcome of APEC, he said the declaration was something that he would not reject "as it leaves room for the kind of interpretations and recognition for the WTO (World Trade Organisation)."

On security issues brought up during the meeting, he said security was important in terms of getting economies to grow such as in the case of security in travel and the like.

"But we are not interested in other aspects of security such as military action," he said. -- BERNAMA
SHO MR SHY