

08 OCT 2003

Mahathir-ASEAN

DR MAHATHIR SAYS HIS DEPARTURE WILL NOT AFFECT ASEAN

By: Openg Onn and Salbiah Said

NUSA DUA (Bali), Oct 8 (Bernama) -- Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says, ASEAN is a collective decision, and his departure from office will not affect the regional grouping.

"I think ASEAN will make progress whether I am around or not. I don't think it will make a difference at all," he told a media conference before heading for home after the ninth ASEAN Summit, which ended here today.

ASEAN, he said, adopted a collective approach, and that the grouping had set their own goals and knew their directions.

"They will make progress whether they change leaders or not. They have seen many changes in leadership in ASEAN and it does not affect ASEAN's policy or progress," said Dr Mahathir, who will be retiring at the end of the month.

Dr Mahathir, who was also asked on how he felt about stepping down from office after being at the helm for 22 years, said: "I am 78 years old, I think I should be retiring and give other people a chance to do better."

He said that he believed in the saying 'don't overstay your welcome'. "That is a good saying to follow. So, I try to follow that."

The premier said his mother, who had a very strong influence on him, had taught him that "when the food is still very nice, that's the time when I should stop. Otherwise, I will be over-eating."

This adage had become his guide in managing the country, said Dr Mahathir.

"So today, I have no problem. But not to say no problem but less problem in Malaysia now. Everything is in place, it is the right time to leave. You don't want to leave after people kick you out."

Asked by a Japanese journalist on what he would do during his retirement, he said, he would continue to be friendly with Japan.

"Occasionally, I will visit Japan, have a holiday there...look at Sakura...very beautiful Japan. Some Japanese are interested in hearing me say nasty things about other countries. I would do that," he said drawing laughter.

On China, he said, as a growing economic giant, the republic would play a very important role in East Asia, and in fact, on the global level, the country played an important role as an economic power house.

"Obviously, it is going to be quite rich," he said.

Asked on fears that China would emerge as a defence power to rival the United States, he said, even if China were to spend a small fraction of its income on defence, it would be quite considerable.

"All countries spend some money on their defences. I still remember the condition imposed on Japan. It may not have spent more than one per cent of its GDP (Gross Domestic Product) on defence, but its GDP was very small then. That was in 1945," he said.

"One per cent is minute. Today, Japan's GDP is huge. One per cent is bigger than most European countries spend on their defences. Japan's capability on defence would be high now," he added.

In the case of China, even if it limited its expenditure on defence, it would be big.

He felt that there should not be any fear towards China as it had no history of colonising other countries.

Malaysia, he said, had been living close to China, so were the other ASEAN countries.

"We have not been conquered by China or colonised by China. We had been colonised, however, by countries which are 800,000 miles away from us.

"So, we should not look at it as a threat but an opportunity. Think of the amount of things people can send to a rich China. America would certainly be able to export more things to China now than the time when it was not an open economy," said Dr Mahathir.

On China and India which today signed the Treaty of Amity and Cooperation (TAC) with ASEAN, he said it would bring prosperity and create a bigger market for the region.

ASEAN trade would grow by leaps and bounds as China and India provided the market with their combined population of 2.4 billion people.

"We believe in prospering our neighbours. This is a concept that is accepted by both China and India," he said stressing that their accession to the treaty would have no impact on ASEAN's external policies, as "we see eye to eye on most of the issues."

Asked on Australia's position in the region, Dr Mahathir said it had been made known to the world that it wanted to be the deputy sheriff to oversee the region.

"It is very difficult to get along with this deputy sheriff who is always looking over your shoulder.

"Australia must decide whether it is (in) Europe, America or Asia. If it is (in) Asia, there's no problem. But we see Australia as some sort of a transplant from another region," he said.

"Australia is not (in) Asia, but at the end of this month, I will not be around. People might change their minds, I don't know.

"Australians also distinguish Asians by race. We think of ourselves as Asians, but they cannot think of themselves as Asians. If they don't think about race, well they say 'I am Asian'. What's wrong with saying that and behaving like Asians and not being too critical of other people," he said.

On Singapore's desire to see a faster implementation of the ASEAN single market or the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), he said. "They would like to move faster and we're not standing in their way."

Singapore on its own, could accelerate their own bilateral trade pacts.

On Singapore's proposal that ASEAN implemented an open skies policy for freight, he said that was something new.

"We have to examine whether we would benefit from it or not. Singapore is a free port. It is already a duty free nation. We are not a duty free country. We have to make ourselves a duty free country. But Singapore is one. Unless it offers to pay people for importing goods into Singapore.

On bilateral problems with Singapore, he said, "It is something that we can resolve between ourselves. It takes time but we can resolve them."

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