

04 AUG 2003

MAHATHIR-EAST ASIAN

DR M CALLS FOR OPEN SUPPORT ON EAST ASIAN ECONOMIC GROUPING

KUALA LUMPUR, Aug 4 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today called on the governments of East Asian countries to come out openly to support the idea of forming the East Asian Economic grouping.

Once out in the open, it would become a concrete foundation towards its establishment, Dr Mahathir said when responding to a question from the floor at the First East Asia Congress here.

The Prime Minister said the gist of the grouping had already been established in the form of Asean + 3, which involved Asean countries, Japan, China and South Korea.

"But we call it Asean + 3 so as not to ruffle the feathers of other countries. But now we should come out in the open and say we want to have the East Asian Economic grouping...it's very simple," he said.

From there, an institution could be set up and further discussions could be had about the establishment while trying to learn more about each other to overcome any constraints, Dr Mahathir said.

"As far as Malaysia is concerned, we have already accepted the idea 10 years ago, and we would be very happy if we stopped hiding behind Asean + 3 and called ourselves the East Asian Economic grouping," he said.

To another question, the Prime Minister said there should be a body to monitor the forming of the group so as to ensure no mistakes were made.

"It's a good idea to have one body that will examine all the things that I have mentioned, all the questions that I mentioned just now, so that we would be able to avoid making too many mistakes.

"But I feel certain that we will make mistake but we must be willing to correct the mistakes so if the mistakes are noticed early by this special institution, then we will avoid having a very big debate, involving many people which will (only) come to nothing," he said.

About the role the grouping could play along with other existing groups such as Asean and Apec, Dr Mahathir said all the East Asian countries should come together to get the maximum impact by speaking and acting together.

"Why should Europe form a European Union...because this obviously would give them some advantage while the East Asian grouping would give us the same advantage," he said.

Dr Mahathir also said it would be easier to reach an agreement with a smaller group which shared similar thinking about serving the people through development.

"Why shouldn't East Asian countries come together? We are not at war with each other, we are on friendly terms and if we come together, we would be able to achieve more especially in the international fora," he said.

Dr Mahathir also said there was no harm in having an East Asian Economic grouping, even if those countries were also members of Apec.

When asked whether the East Asian Grouping would be ready to talk about the issue concerning North Korea, Dr Mahathir said: "At the moment, we have not talked about the union of the two Koreans."

He said the grouping would not interfere in internal problems between two countries as it believed that both parties would be able to resolve the problem from time to time.

On whether the grouping would be ready to accept Hong Kong and East Timor as members, Dr Mahathir said it would very much depend on the decision made by its members.

Meanwhile, responding to another question, Dr Mahathir said Japan could play a big role, economically and politically, particularly when it remained the leader in innovative manufacturing and production.

Dr Mahathir said the Japanese know-how could bring about change in other countries in the region, by spreading the knowledge to other parts of East Asia.

"Politically, we need to have Japan focus and think itself as an East Asian country, and Japan has prospered because of East Asia," he added.

"Japan has a big role to play, and Japan as an East Asian country should feel some loyalty to East Asia," Dr Mahathir said.

On China, Dr Mahathir said East Asian countries need to find ways and means to penetrate the China market, despite tough competition from its lower cost of production.

"But we do believe that once the Chinese become more prosperous, it would no longer become a low cost producer, as what had happened to Japan before.

"In time, the cost of producing things in China will increase, and at that stage, perhaps we can penetrate the China market much more easily," he added. -- BERNAMA

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