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Mahathir-Islam

MAHATHIR ADOPTS A MODERATE STANCE

By: Salbiah Said

TOKYO, June 5 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad gave a new dimension to the Asian Leaders' Round Table on the Genesis of a New Asian Order today by giving the right perspective of Islam.

The round table, held for the first time in conjunction with the 9th Nikkei Conference, saw Dr Mahathir, now on a three-day working visit to Japan, taking a more moderate stance on issues ranging from Japan's role in Asia to speculative currency trading, terrorism and the North Korea issue.

Dr Mahathir took questions from the floor, through moderator Yukio Okamoto, special advisor to Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi, with ease, yet with candour and sharp comments.

His repartee and immediate response to rather tough questions drew loud applause from the audience at the round table themed "Asean-Japan Exchange year 2003: Genesis of a New Asian Order".

The other members of the panel were Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and former Japanese premier Ryutaro Hashimoto.

He was asked on the tone of his keynote address earlier, which was described as moderate -- a departure from his strong stance on regional and international issues, including his views on Japan's role in Asia.

"Perhaps, I am older now," said Dr Mahathir, 77, who is retiring this October.

Age does not seem to be catching up with Dr Mahathir's maturity and consistency in his position on speculative trading. During the Asian financial crisis, the region's currencies, including the ringgit, took a severe beating, with George Soros, named a "rogue" speculator.

Asked on Islam and terrorism, Dr Mahathir said he was a Muslim fundamentalist. Literally, fundamentalism in Islam advocates peace.

"Islam does not advocate violence. Similarly, other religions, such as Christianity, also do not preach violence. Islam also does not advocate racist teachings," he said.

However, some Muslims, out of anger and sparked by religious and political sentiments, reacted aggressively, especially when their security was at stake, he said, citing the Palestinians, who were forced out of their own homeland by the Israelis.

"But acts of terrorism cannot be associated with the teachings of Islam. Of importance is the need to examine the root cause on why those groups such as the Palestinians rebel.

"If we can give them their right to their land, they will be less prone to acts of terrorism.

"If Islamic fundamentalism is linked to terrorism, then I would be a terrorist in my own country.

"Terrorism and Islam are separate. There are also terrorists of other religions, but why aren't they called, say, Christian or Protestant terrorists, or Indian terrorists. But when it comes to a Muslim suspect, he is often known as a suspected Muslim terrorist or suspected Muslim fundamentalist," he said.

The word "rogue" received special mention in Dr Mahathir's remarks at the round table, a term which gained prominence at the height of the Asian financial crisis in 1997, but keeping to his moderate stance, he did not mention Soros.

He said that while North Korea had been accused of being untrustworthy and termed as a rogue country as it would not comply with its past commitments on nuclear non-proliferation, efforts to eradicate poverty were not forthcoming.

"We regret North Korea's decision for not acceding to this treaty. But North Korea earlier agreed to do so. It was clear that after they agreed, help was not forthcoming and it was not a priority to eradicate poverty.

"They then resorted to weapons. I am sure they didn't want this. If people didn't help, they turned back to rogues...let us try to talk to them...whether it is poverty or power (nuclear).

"It is not going to cost the world if we help North Korea. South Korea is not in favour of military action against North Korea but peaceful solution."

Dr Mahathir also shared his thoughts on the rationale for the Asian bond market initiated by Thaksin.

The Asian bond market was originally mooted by Japan during the Asian financial crisis but did not take off due to lack on consensus.

Dr Mahathir said the time was now right for the bond market and Malaysia supported the idea.

"Bonds are denominated in US dollars. We used to think the US dollar is a sound currency. Eighty per cent of Malaysia's trade is denominated in US dollars," he added.

But now, the dollar, which has been under strong selling pressure against the euro and yen, had depreciated more than 35 per cent in value terms, he said.

Elaborating on the over-reliance on the US dollar, he said there was a need for Asia to determine its own exchange rate. Asian currencies, he said, should each have their own exchange rate against the trading currency.

"If we keep insisting on using the US dollar in our trade, this would cause the dollar to appreciate.

"We should move away from the US dollar. Currency traders can make your currency depreciate to a ridiculous level.

"In fact, currency trading should not be allowed as it allows manipulation and short-selling," he said.

On the possibility of moving from the dollar to the Euro, Dr Mahathir said: "We'd like to fix our trade in Euro but our neighbours do their calculations in US dollars.

"If we can realise the Asian bond market, then we can make the currency market work to our mutual benefit."

Turning to Japan, Dr Mahathir said it had learnt a lesson from its past mistakes that conquest was not the right approach to have its values and ideas accepted.

"If Southeast Asia keeps thinking of the past, then we cannot trade with Japan. Sometimes, we make mistakes.

"Japan can help us in terms of investments and financially. We have also prospered from Japan. Japan is important and it can certainly contribute to Asia's growth," Dr Mahathir said.

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