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Abdullah-Integration

EAST ASIA NEEDS QUANTUM LEAP IN ECONOMIC INTEGRATION- PM

By: Azman Ujang

TOKYO, June 3 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad

Badawi today called for a quantum leap in the economic integration of East

Asia, saying this is the time to do so as the region is more peaceful now

than it has been in the last few hundred years.

Describing East Asian economic integration as one of the wonders of the

modern age, Abdullah said countries in the region should now extend it

beyond the economic sphere to areas such as politics, finance, education,

health labour, science, technology and the environment.

"If we can enhance our political cooperation and integration, we will

certainly be contributing immensely to the peace and stability of our

region.

"If we can integrate and cooperate diplomatically, we will definitely

be enhancing our position and role in the world," he told the 10th international conference on Asia's future here.

Abdullah, the keynote speaker at the annual conference organized by the

Nikkei newspaper group, said East Asian economic integration involving the

10 countries of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) with

Japan, China and South Korea, was already a productive and powerful fact

that had already changed not only their immediate world but also the greater world beyond the region.

"The trail has been blazed. The frontiers have already been opened. The

efforts of a few outstanding men and women, some of whom will be addressing

this conference this very day, have had a large impact.

"Because of their contributions, this world will never be the same

again," said the prime minister of the other speakers at the conference

which included former Malaysian prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad,

former Philippine President Fidel V. Ramos and Singapore's Senior Minister

Lee Kuan Yew.

He suggested that the Asean+3 (with Japan, China and South Korea) forum be turned into a regular summit of the East Asian Economic Community to inject a greater sense of integration of these countries.

"This will secure at the same time a very pragmatic platform for regional cooperation in the spheres of economics, politics and diplomacy.

"This will be the quantum leap to new heights and to new directions and raise the comfort level of the Asean+3 to greater height of trust and confidence among them," he said.

The prime minister told the conference that East Asian integration did not require the creation of "Asiacrats" resembling the "Eurocrats" in Brussels, the headquarters of the European Union.

In his view, what is urgently needed is the creation of an active, imaginative and creative East Asian network of think tanks.

Abdullah hoped that the East Asian Congress to be held in Kuala Lumpur later this month as well as the East Asian Forum also to be hosted by Malaysia by the end of the year would come up with concrete proposals that could be forwarded to the Asean+3 leaders when they meet each year.

He also spoke of the annual meeting of the Asean+3 leaders, describing it as "symbolically, diplomatically and politically important".

But he also spoke of the need to generate creative and productive ideas to give meat and concrete substance so that the Asean+3 process could be taken to greater heights and new directions.

Ending his speech, Abdullah said: "We must not be a region that can say No. This is far too negative. Rather it is better to be a region that can say Yes. Yes to peace, Yes to stability, Yes to fairness and Yes to prosperity, not only in our region but also globally".

Earlier the prime minister said he had come to the conference to keep a promise he made last year to Nikkei President and Chief Executive Officer Ryoki Sugita.

"I almost forgot about it," he said.

And he drew laughter from the participants when he "announced" just before making his speech that he had forgotten his reading glasses.

"I left my glasses, sorry," he said as Malaysian Ambassador to Japan

Datuk Marzuki Mohd Noor went on stage to hand over the glasses.

Abdullah later called on Japanese prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi

before leaving for home after a one-day trip.

-- BERNAMA

AU KHY AAM