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Go the EU way, says Abdullah

By Chow Kum Hor

SERI KEMBANGAN, Mon. - East Asian nations should move faster towards becoming a regional community like the European Union, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said today.

As a first step, he suggested that Asean leaders sign a declaration with China, Japan and South Korea similar to the one that created Asean more than 30 years ago.

"I believe that we in the region have dallied long enough," Abdullah said. "It is now time to take the process of building our East Asian Community to new heights and in new directions.

"If we are truly fortunate, if we are truly persistent, it will take at least two generations for East Asia to reach the European benchmark."

In his keynote address to the Second East Asian Congress here, Abdullah said the time had come for action on the idea first raised by Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad more than 13 years ago.

Abdullah observed that the concept of an "East Asian Community" had passed through the three stages identified by German philosopher Schopenhauer for all great ideas in history - first it was ridiculed, then strongly opposed, and now accepted as self-evident.

He noted that with the institution of an annual meeting of Asean+3 leaders, the time had come for a declaration on a "Concord of East Asia".

"Whether East Asians like it or not, whether our friends from other regions like it or not, the process of greater East Asian co-operation, integration and community-building cannot be stopped," he said.

Abdullah listed six "cardinal imperatives" for a broader East Asian community. It should be, among other things:

- * Egalitarian and democratic, with no country harbouring imperial designs, and where there is no bullying or hegemony;

- * Omni-directional and embracing, with countries eager to befriend anyone who can contribute to peace and prosperity; and,

- * Caring and mutually beneficial, where it is in the interest of countries to ensure that their neighbours are doing well.

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