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`East Asian nations must forgive to progress'

Ashraf Abdullah

EAST Asian countries must be able to forgive each other for their past atrocities and work together to achieve their own destiny, former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

He said East Asian countries should emulate the French and the Germans who, despite being bitter enemies for hundreds of years, had built new relations for the sake of wealth creation and peace.

"War, big or small, is no longer an option for anyone. The money being spent on the development, production and equipment of so-called defence forces are a waste, for the rich as well as the poor," he said at the Inaugural meeting of the East Asia Forum themed "East Asian Community, Peace, Prosperity and Progress in East Asia: Challenges and Vision".

The forum, which was attended by academicians, thinkers and senior civil servants, was opened by South Korean President Roh Moo-Hyun.

Several other former heads of state and government spoke at the event. They were former South Korean President Kim Dae-jung, former Vietnamese Prime Minister Vo Van Kiet and former Japanese Prime Minister Hata Tsutomu.

Dr Mahathir said in East Asia, there were many countries which had been at war with each other, some repeatedly, but to have peace these countries must learn from history that war would not resolve their disputes.

"Like the French and Germans, they must be prepared to forget past enmity and strive for a new relationship between them, a relationship based on friendship and co-operation for mutual benefit.

"If we can progress to the stage when the wars and the massacres of the past no longer fill our minds when we meet each other then peace would become more possible in the region," he added.

He said East Asian nations should not fear superpower from outside the region and should assure themselves that Asia was too big for even the strongest to conquer and rule.

"So it is really not worthwhile equipping our forces with heavy and expensive weapons. Instead, with the powerful economic clout that we have, we should together ensure that our rights are upheld. In the process peace is maintained and economic growth sustained."

Therefore, he said, East Asian nations should instead focus on economic co-operation between them.

"We have made a good start with the Asean+3 forums. We now have the financial co-operation in the form of Swap Arrangements and the Asia Bond Market.

"We are now working on the Asean-Northeast Asia Free Trade Agreement. Slowly, we are progressing towards the East Asia Economic Group," he said.

He added that the EAEG, which he proposed 12 years ago, was merely a forum for consultation on matters of common interest and not the same as the European Union or its predecessor, the European Economic Community.

"It is up to the East Asian countries to decide. It is their future. If others can decide what they want to do for their future, the East Asians have as much right to do so.

"It must be emphasised that there should be no Nato equivalent in the East Asian Community.

"We should not design a defence pact which invariably implies that we have an enemy and we want to prepare to fight that enemy. And that enemy will likewise prepare to fight us."

Instead, he said, forces from East Asia should act according to each country's policies and commitment.

"Largely they should be for internal security. The countries of East Asia should agree to reduce their armed forces and the sophistication of their weapons. An arms race must be avoided, by agreement."