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Dr Mahathir: I have no regrets over admitting Myanmar to Asean

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who was instrumental in admitting Myanmar to Asean during Malaysia's chairmanship of the regional grouping in 1997, said yesterday that he had no regrets about doing so.

At a Press conference at the end of the two-day Ninth Asean Summit, which is his last, Dr Mahathir expressed confidence that given time, Myanmar would embrace democracy.

"I have no regrets.

"I think people go through certain period of difficulties and they have to react to those difficulties.

"We have to be patient with them," he said.

Malaysia was steadfast in admitting Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia as Asean members in 1997 although other members of the grouping feared that these less-developed countries could impede the region's economic growth.

Some Asean members were apprehensive about accepting Myanmar as they were afraid of possible retaliation from world powers.

But amid criticisms from the United States and the European Union, Asean, under the Malaysian chairmanship accepted Myanmar.

The May 30 arrest of the leader of the National League for Democracy, Aung San Suu Kyi, and her detention in a Government "rest house" incurred the wrath of world leaders.

However, there seems to be some progress as Suu Kyi was released last week and is now being held under house arrest in her lakeside home in Yangon.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia did not believe in applying sanctions against a country which refused or had been unable to become a democracy.

"When you apply sanctions, you are punishing the people, you are starving the people and depriving them of medicine, etc. And that is a very cruel way of spreading an ideology which is supposed to be good.

"If democracy is so good, then democracy should not use such methods in order to spread democracy ... like dropping atomic bombs. The only country which has dropped atomic bombs, happens to be a democratic country. And I don't appreciate that."

Dr Mahathir said while Malaysia would like Myanmar to become democracy, it understood the problems faced by the country.

"It is not just one person who is against the Government. They have about 100 different ethnic groups, most of whom are armed with guns and rockets. Although there is some reconciliation today, they have still retained their weapons. This is a problem."

Dr Mahathir said Myanmar had drawn up a road map towards democracy and added: "Perhaps the timing has to be adjusted for them to progress towards democracy."