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Dr M: EAEG is a reality (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has called on leaders of East Asian nations to stop "hiding" behind the Asean+3 formation and admit that there is a need to establish the East Asian Economic Grouping (EAEG).

The Prime Minister said they must speak up and show their full support in formalising the grouping.

"The concrete step we have to take now is to say yes to EAEG. The Asean+3 should stop hiding behind the title and say we are EAEG. There is some nervousness among some of the people and I don't know whether they have accepted the idea.

"But as far as Malaysia is concerned, we accepted the idea 12 years ago," Dr Mahathir said on the opening day of the three-day first East Asia Congress at the Putra World Trade Centre.

He was responding to a question from a participant who had asked whether the Asean+3 Summit should be renamed EAEG.

Dr Mahathir had earlier presented a keynote address on "Building the East Asian Community: The Way Forward" before an international audience comprising businessmen, educationists and policymakers at the congress organised by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies.

Noting that Asean+3 was actually EAEG, Dr Mahathir said it was named the former so as not to "ruffle any feathers".

"We have been trying to get them (East Asian nations) to reach a consensus on the formation of EAEG. But because of some disapproval from some quarters, we have to do it in a very roundabout way.

"At first we say no and it is not good for us to come together but I know everybody feels that it is good. As there were constraints, we got around this problem by saying we are the Asean+3 although we know what it means, seriously it is the East Asian grouping.

"It (EAEG) is not something we cannot achieve. Thus, we should come out in the open and say we want to have the EAEG," he said.

For instance, Dr Mahathir said Asean countries had been able to work together after their leaders declared the formation of the grouping.

"Asean can work because we agreed to form Asean and once we agreed to form it, the process is simple," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Asean was formed because of the failure of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) which was now replaced by the World Trade Organisation.

"We were watching the progress of GATT and found that it was not getting anywhere. It was actually the General Agreement to Talk and Talk. We were not benefiting from it. There were so many rounds of talks until we felt dizzy.

"So, we thought maybe a smaller group was much easier for us to reach an agreement. We should come together to be able to speak and achieve more, especially in international fora like GATT. Speaking in one single voice, we would be able to counter some of the influence of other countries," he said.

In his speech, Dr Mahathir said when he earlier made calls for the establishment of EAEG, some could not or would not understand it.

"They did give us a great deal of self-serving advice. They helped some of us understand that we had no right to dream what was not their dream."

He said those who spoke of East Asians coming together then were

regarded as insane or foolish, revolutionaries, the most delirious or dangerous of men, even heretics fit for burning at the stake.

Dr Mahathir added that from today's perspective, the proposals made then appeared unexceptional, and "hardly reason for anyone to raise a sweat, for high blood pressure or palpitations of the heart".

"Those who had the temerity, a decade or so ago, to suggest that the journey should begin can look back with some modest satisfaction. But I believe there is little time for the luxury of resting on laurels."

Dr Mahathir said to empower East Asian countries, and to give it voice and clout, all nations in the region must also work together to build an East Asian Community of Common and Cooperative Peace and Prosperity.

He said for the good of people in the region and its future, "I believe that in the years ahead we must concentrate on building this community that is empowered within our region and empowered in the wider world".

This, he said, would ensure "the governance of East Asia, by East Asia and for East Asia".

"Today, we are the most dependent region in the world for trade and economic development. Our very lives, our entire future hinges on decisions made in Geneva and Washington and New York. Yet our voice is seldom heard and even more seldom heeded. We carry little weight. We have little clout.

"We are not cows to be led by the nose. We are not children to be led by the hand. This is a journey we must make with our own two feet. We must walk together. We must act together and advance together."

The Prime Minister said the region owed it to the people to amplify its voice, aggregate its weight and boost its clout, and that whatever schemes of cooperation embarked upon must be based on mutual benefit, respect, egalitarianism, consensus and democracy.

Explaining further the need for establishing the community, he said the countries of East Asia were so inter-related, enmeshed and in the same boat that a critical threat to peace anywhere in the region was a critical threat to peace everywhere in East Asia.

"A hole in the rear of the East Asian boat is as much a danger to those standing in front as it is to those sitting at the back."

Dr Mahathir said, however, that if all in the region were committed and united, its peace and prosperity would be less fragile and more durable.

He said by establishing the community, it did not mean that the region should turn away from anything and anyone.

"We must not forget those to whom we owe our full measure of gratitude. Old friends are to be venerated. All those who are not against us are with us. They are or will be our friends."

He said the experience of Western Europe and certainly that of Asean would provide a rich reservoir of lessons.

At the dialogue later, Dr Mahathir was asked whether there was a need to set up a special institution to study the establishment of the East Asian community.

The Prime Minister replied in the affirmative, saying that such an institution could determine the "whys, whens, whats and hows" of establishment, so that mistakes could be avoided.

On the role of Japan in the community, Dr Mahathir said it had a big role to play, economically and politically.

"It has got technology, capital and is a leader in innovation and manufacturing. This can bring about change in the other countries via the spread of knowledge and skills. I hope that since Japan is an East Asian country, it would feel some loyalty for East Asia."