

07 OCT 2003
ASEAN-Tribute
ASEAN PAYS TRIBUTE TO DR MAHATHIR

NUSA DUA (Bali), Oct 7 (Bernama) -- The historic signing of the ASEAN Concord II today witnessed some sombre moments when Indonesian President Megawati Soekarnoputri could not hold back her tears in her special tribute to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who is leaving office end of this month.

Megawati said the two-day summit in which ASEAN made another historic accomplishment with the Bali Concord II, was not without sadness -- for it was the last summit that was graced by his presence.

"Today, we take the opportunity to say a fond farewell to Dr Mahathir. It is a strange kind of farewell that we are bidding him," she said as she took a sentimental lane by lacing praises for Dr Mahathir, a leader regarded as an icon for "New Asia".

She said the mark of Dr Mahathir's personal statesmanship had been imprinted so deep in the consciousness of ASEAN that in a larger sense, he would always be with the grouping.

"The reach of his mind is so far and wide that on every issue laid before us, we will always try to recall what Dr Mahathir said about it," she said.

Megawati said Dr Mahathir always had strong and informed views, and never hesitated to say the unpleasant, adding that there was no way of counting things he did for ASEAN.

"Indeed, he was one of those who worked the hardest to articulate ASEAN's vision of itself," she said.

She hoped that the Prime Minister could be around sharing his counsel and giving the benefit of his wisdom and experience any time in the future when the ASEAN leaders were bent by the weight of enormous challenges.

Megawati, the current chairperson of ASEAN later handed Dr Mahathir a

memento in the form of a group photograph of the ASEAN leaders taken just before the summit began this morning.

ASEAN's gratitude and tribute to Dr Mahathir, who led Malaysia since the last 22 years, is not without merit.

Under his guidance, ASEAN took on a more vibrant and dominant role, enjoying equal footing as other world groupings.

It was during his tenure that Asean took Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos into its realm, thus broadening its sphere of influence and border.

Today, ASEAN has become a force to be reckoned with when evolved from a mere grouping of friendly neighbours, into a solid entity, establishing economic cooperation with key dialogue partners -- Japan, South Korea and China -- under the ASEAN plus three (Asean+3) entity.

It was Dr Mahathir, who initiated and pushed the Asean+3, an idea which he suggested in 1990 as a counterweight to the trade blocs formed in Europe and North America.

"Dr M", as he is popularly known, will no longer be at the centre stage of Asean after he retires, but having carved his name as a world icon, his ideas and views will always be much sought after," she said.

-- BERNAMA

SS OPP JM TS