

**Najib: Inclusiveness must be at heart of Asean**  
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Prime Minister Najib Abdul Razak has urged inclusiveness and sustainability to be at the core of Asean policies to build a truly integrated bloc.

In urging this, Najib said being a community meant placing appropriate emphasis on the development agenda.

Opening the 48th Asean Ministers Meeting (AMM) at the Putra World Trade Centre (PWTC) in Kuala Lumpur today, he noted that Asean's 10 member states were at different stages, and narrowing these gaps was not optional.

"It is essential if we're to build a truly integrated Asean, which is why inclusiveness and sustainability must be at the heart of our policies going forward," Najib said.

Najib, who is also finance minister, pointed out that an increasingly integrated Asean was on course to be the world's fourth largest economy by 2050.

"Some even estimate that we could be the fourth largest market after the European Union, the United States and China by 2030, only 15 years from now," he said.

**Asean has third biggest workforce**

"We (Asean) already have the third biggest workforce after India and China, and it's entirely realistic for us to see ourselves as a 'Third Force' in Asia," Najib said.

The prime minister stressed that Asean should be confident about its future and be vocal about its confidence.

He told those gathered at the opening session that if Asean was sometimes underestimated, "we must be careful that we are not guilty of that ourselves".

"It's timely for Asean's united voice to be heard more frequently at multilateral fora," Najib said, adding that there was no reason why Asean should not take a more active role in the international community and look beyond its borders, together.

He drove home the point that this was partly because many issues today, such as climate change, transnational crime, the threat of extremism and migration could not be resolved by individual nations alone.

**Region-to-region cooperation**

"Region-to-region cooperation and dialogue is more effective at dealing with issues of such magnitude," the prime minister said.

Najib also commended past and present regional foreign ministers who had built and strengthened the grouping's regional cooperation and taking bold steps when necessary - such as when they acted swiftly to deal with the recent crisis of irregular migration in Southeast Asia.

"This was a considerable test for Asean, but all parties concerned managed to handle it in a timely and effective manner," he said.

The Malaysian leader said 2015 provided another kind of test for Asean as it adopts the Asean Community Vision 2020 at the 27th Asean Summit in November.

Regional cooperation aside, Najib said Asean should not be shy in reaching out and connecting with the world, including with its dialogue and sectoral partners, such as those in the East Asia Summit and Asean Regional Forum.

- Bernama

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