

Make Apec relevant to all

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HANOI: Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi has called for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) agenda to be made more relevant to the needs and aspirations of all 21 members in the diverse region instead of just a few.

He said a common purpose could only evolve from a sense of shared ownership, and this would only exist when the Apec agenda served the interests of all members as much as possible.

"All member economies need to be accorded a sense of equality and their concerns addressed with equal measure," the Prime Minister said in his keynote speech to some 1,200 business leaders from the region at the Apec CEO Summit here yesterday.

Stressing that mutual and comprehensive well-being was a compelling challenge for the Asia-Pacific region, Abdullah highlighted five priorities, the topmost of which was to define Apec's role in the emerging regional architecture and make it a more effective process for regional cooperation.

"Apec should also return to its original purpose as an instrument for promoting economic growth through fostering freer, and fairer, flow of trade.

"Its assumption of some security role following the Sept 11 attacks in the United States has compromised its original purpose and blurred its focus," he

said, adding that security, after all, was the express concern of the Asean Regional Forum.

Abdullah said the primary focus should be to allow for the full flowering

of the human potential.

"While the challenge is most severe in North Korea and Myanmar, it is also grave elsewhere where significant numbers of people endure political marginali-

sation and economic hardship. This can and does happen in democracies as well."

Abdullah said the second priority was to reduce the tensions between Japan and China on the one hand and Japan and South Korea on the other, noting that the animosities were an obstacle to the cultivation of regional goodwill and friendship.

The third, he said, was to ensure the integrity and smooth functioning of existing processes for regional cooperation, particularly to the Asean+3 and the East Asia Summit processes.

He said Asean+3 was the primary vehicle for community building in the region while the East Asian Summit could complement as a useful forum for dialogue on strategic issues involving additional participants in support of community building in East Asia.

"It is critical that we preserve the integrity of the respective processes. We must not allow the pursuit of narrow national interests to subvert the integrity of one process against the other process," he said.

He said the fourth priority should be to adopt a proper and correct appreciation of the challenge or perceived threat posed by a rapidly prospering China.

"The most important prerequisite for building common purpose is the realisation that whatever our nationality, race or religion, and whatever our economic condition, we are one," he said.