

PM: Rivalries, distrust root of East Asia's woes

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■ **By Koh Lay Chin**
laych@nst.com.my

KUALA LUMPUR: East Asia's problem is one of under-ambition and never-ending debates about membership and inclusion, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said yesterday.

The East Asia grouping, an assembly of 10 Asean nations and China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, India and New Zealand, was sorely misunderstood due to regional rivalries and distrust, he said, which translated into an environment ill-suited for co-operation and community-building.

"The question of who should be included and who should be excluded continues to be asked. We cannot seek to be continually moving the boundaries of consensus and agreement," Abdullah said in his keynote address at the Fourth East Asia Congress here yesterday.

He said East Asian countries' under-ambition was one of the main factors behind the unsatisfactory condition of their interstate relations, wrought with recent "public recriminations, violent mass demonstrations and hostile sabre rattling".

East Asian countries were not doing enough with the resources and opportunities they had to reinforce the environment for peace, security and prosperity, Abdullah added.

It was imperative, he said, that East Asian countries did not hesitate at this crucial juncture and

ensure that there were deeper reforms to see effective economic transformations.

"We must not merely harvest the low-hanging fruit. We must persist with those that are higher and more difficult to reach but are as rewarding, if not more so."

The formation of an European Union-like East Asian Community was covered when the grouping met for the first time in December

but talks on the East Asia Summit (EAS) took place in the midst of much wrangling over membership and jostling for influence.

There were different views on who should be in the driver's seat of the 16-member grouping amid fears that China would dominate in the absence of the United States. The inclusion of Australia, India and New Zealand to counterweigh China's influence also

peevled the economic giant.

Abdullah said he had to reiterate that there had been a clear understanding that the Asean+3 process was to be the driving force in efforts for community-building, and that the EAS was a forum for strategic dialogue.

"It is not, and it has never been, a question of 'either-or'. It has always been about a plurality of dialogue processes, each with its own defined task and complementing one another.

"I have to emphasise these points because there is, until today, an endless and unproductive debate about which process should be elevated or who should be included in what. We run the risk of increasing the competition for spheres of influence and factionalising the region."

These issues are expected to be brought up again at Asean's annual meeting and the second East Asia Summit, to be held next week in Cebu, the Philippines.

Abdullah said much more could be done for the purposes of East Asia's community-building, such as intensifying the restructuring of its economies.

"The global saving-investment imbalance is not being corrected to any significant extent. It may even be getting wider. This should be enough reason for concern.

"Until the elements are in place for a co-ordinated and long-term resolution, the global macro-economy will continue to be a dangerous place and economic growth prospects will remain risky."