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East Asia community building takes time: PM

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KUALA LUMPUR: Community building in East Asia will be a long and arduous process, given the historical enmities and fresh rivalries in the region, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said yesterday.

In his keynote address at the Fifth East Asia Congress, Abdullah stressed that there were even suspicions and acrimony among Asean members and critics from within and outside the region would even rubbish the whole concept.

"Community building in East Asia will take longer, because it is (East Asia region) larger and more diverse. The community that emerges will in all likelihood also be understandably weaker," he said at the conference, organised by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies Malaysia (Isis).

"The key, whether in Asean or the broader East Asia, is political will and the fostering of a sense of common identity and shared values

and aspirations."

Abdullah said East Asia could have done much more had it summoned greater commitment and political will.

"At this same forum last year, I noted that East Asia was not doing enough with the resources and opportunities at hand to reinforce the conditions and create the environment for peace, security and prosperity," he said at the two-day conference, themed "The Mapping of the Second Decade of East Asian Cooperation".

Abdullah also commented on the long-term goal of Asean Plus Three (China, Japan and

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South Korea), which is to build an open East Asian community.

"The Asean Plus Three process is not just about cooperation. It is about community building and this distinguishes it from all other processes for cooperation in the wider Asia Pacific region," he said.

Asean would remain the driving force of the Asean Plus Three process.

He also said issues such as peace and goodwill among nations, freedom from hunger and diseases, jobs, a decent quality of life and the environment were also important.

On the Asean Plus Three Cooperation Fund, Abdullah said it showed the participants' collective seriousness to undertake concrete steps to implement the Asean Plus Three agenda. - Bernama