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Najib: People-centric Asean will boost region

KUALA LUMPUR: A people-centric Asean will help secure long-lasting peace and prosperity for the 600 million people living in Southeast Asia, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak.

In his keynote address in conjunction with Asean's 48th anniversary yesterday, Najib said Malaysia regarded the establishment of a "people-first" Asean as an important step towards strengthening the region.

"We have chosen to emphasise the idea of a people-centric Asean in 2015 under Malaysia's chairmanship.

"Throughout its history, Asean may have appeared to operate at an intergovernmental level, but the interests of our citizens are paramount."

Najib said it was time for Asean to raise awareness among its communities and highlight its past achievements.

He also said the establishment of Asean on Aug 8, 1967, was a momentous occasion that marked an important change in how countries within the region cooperated with one another.

"This day has a special resonance with me as my father, Tun Abdul

Razak, was one of the founding fathers who signed the Bangkok Declaration in 1967, which brought Asean into being."

Najib said the declaration had required member countries to actively promote peace, progress and development, with an emphasis on collaboration and mutual assistance.

"Nearly five decades alter its existence, Asean has achieved many milestones. And our achievements have led us to this day; the community now is the third largest workforce in the world and is poised to be a major global player."

According to estimates, Najib said the region would be the fourth largest market in the world, after the European Union, the United States and China by 2030.

"Thanks to greater integration, intra-Asean trade was worth US\$458 billion (RM1.8 trillion) in 2008 and last year, this rose to US\$609 billion," he said, adding that this figure could increase to US\$2.5 trillion in the next decade.

Present were Najib's wife, Datin Seri Rosmah Mansor, Deputy Foreign Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Reezal Merican Naina Merican,

Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Ali Hamsa and Asean Secretary-General Le Luong Minh.

Najib also said Malaysia would host the inaugural Asean People's Awards at the 27th summit later this year, where 10 outstanding groups or individuals who contributed to the region would be given recognition and celebrated.

After his speech, Najib launched the *My Asean, My Home* book, with copies to be distributed to children across the region to educate them on the history and future of Asean.