

Officials scrambling to save RCEP

The Star - 4/11/2019 pg. 2

Multilateral negotiations challenging, says Dr M

In Bangkok
**MERGAWATI
ZULFAKAR**



merga@thestar.com.my

BANGKOK: As doubts are emerging that Asean and its six trade partners are unable to conclude their negotiations for a regional deal at the 35th Asean summit in the Thai capital, Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has admitted that negotiations in any multilateral deal are never easy.

“We have 16 countries and because one country demands something that we can’t accept, the deal cannot be concluded.

“Multilateral negotiations and even bilateral are not easy. It is not just being nice to each other, pat each other’s back and say agree with what I say and I agree with what you say,” Dr Mahathir told the Malaysian media after a series of summits with leaders of China and India.

Officials and trade ministers are scrambling to salvage the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) negotiations following reports that India was making new demands.

International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Darell Leiking who



United bloc: Dr Mahathir with Asean leaders and UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres (fifth from left) posing for a group photo during the 10th Asean-UN Summit in Bangkok on the sidelines of the 35th Asean Summit. — AFP

was present at the press conference did not mention any country, but confirmed that while most chapters were done, one country was “unclear” on its stand due to its own domestic issues.

The RCEP involves Asean 10 and six FTA partners (China, Japan, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and India) and touted to be the world’s largest trade bloc.

Darell said the leaders would issue a statement after their summit today.

When asked whether he was disappointed negotiations could not be wrapped up at this summit, Dr Mahathir replied: “The problem with multilateral negotiations is

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that we must get consensus and if one does not agree, it will not take off.”

He also said during the summit between Asean leaders and Chinese Prime Minister Li Keqiang, most of them spoke on the trade war between China and the United States.

“There were some references to this.

“Basically, it was not started by China, and China itself would like to put an end to this trade war.

“It is the stand of the US, which is causing this thing to go on and on and becoming worse and worse.

“At the moment, we don’t see when it will end. It may end if (Donald) Trump is not re-elected.

“If he is re-elected, it will be another five years of trade war.

“But I hope that this will be resolved one way or another,” he said.

Dr Mahathir said Asean leaders felt that the trade war was disrupting their trade and economic growth.

He also said China reiterated its undertaking that Beijing subscribed to a peaceful South China Sea.

“We hope any problem that we

may have in South China Sea can be resolved through negotiations and certainly not through violence and war.

“The problem is when countries from outside the area try to provoke other Asean countries because they are unfriendly towards China and want Asean to be enemies with China.

“If there is war or violence, the ones who will suffer will be Asean and China,” he said.



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