

Asean must narrow developmental gaps, says Anwar

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PETALING JAYA: Asean must direct its focus inward and strengthen economic integration to withstand current global economic headwinds, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

In his policy speech on Asean, delivered at the Asean Secretariat here on Tuesday, he said the region is home to a vast and market of 660 million people.

"The potential is undeniable, but to realise it fully we must narrow the existing development gaps and forge stronger, more equitable economic linkages across member states."

At the 47th Asean Summit in Kuala Lumpur, Anwar had said Asean leaders would renew efforts to reduce tariff and non-tariff barriers to improve the unimpeded flow of goods and create a more seamless and dynamic Asean Economic Community.

He described Asean's network of free trade agreements as a cornerstone of the region's resilience but warned that rising protectionism and shifting supply chains require continued openness and reform.

"It is only through sustained liberalisation and cooperation that we can safeguard jobs, preserve growth and consolidate our position in the global economy."

Anwar said the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) remains central to Asean's role in regional economic architecture.

He said Asean must continue to modernise trade agreements with partners like China, India and South Korea, while advancing the Asean Digital Economy Framework Agreement to position itself at the forefront of digital transformation.

"Business as usual is no longer an option."

Anwar also highlighted sustainability as a core priority, pointing to the Asean Power Grid as key to driving the region's green energy transition, attracting investment and ensuring long-term energy security.

He added that Asean's commitment to regionalism and multilateralism remains the anchor of its collective progress, citing Malaysia's recent role as Asean chair in brokering talks between Cambodia and Thailand amid rising border tensions.

"This reflects not only the strength of Asean's convening power but also the constructive engagement of our partners in safeguarding regional stability.

"Asean cannot control global currents, nor can we dictate terms to the world. Nonetheless, we can chart our own future for the better with courage, foresight and determination."