

**#ASEAN Needs To Position Itself As The 'Third Force' - Najib
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PUTRAJAYA, April 23 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said today that ASEAN needs to position itself as the "third force" that is the focus of the global business community, which now seems to be drawn to markets such as China and India.

He said ASEAN can emerge as a vibrant economic power of huge potential based on its collective population size of 625 million and an increasing middle class.

"I want to portray ASEAN as the 'third force', meaning, the focus will not be just on the big markets as China and India," he added.

Najib said this at an interview with Bernama news agency, at his office in Putrajaya, in conjunction with the 26th ASEAN Summit to be hosted by Malaysia on April 26-27.

The Prime Minister also emphasised the importance of the economic development of ASEAN countries in an inclusive and balanced manner.

He drew attention to the fact that the need to close the development gap among ASEAN nations was on the agenda of the regional grouping, to enable those who are lagging behind to "catch up", including from the aspect of infrastructure development and connectivity.

"Efforts needs to be made at the ASEAN level. But, the role of every government is very important, towards ensuring the level of development in the context of each country, is achieved. Even if not high, just medium," he added.

He said ASEAN collectively had shown encouraging success with an annual growth of between five to six per cent and a gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$2.5 trillion.

Malaysia is the ASEAN chair for 2015, having taken over from Myanmar.

Established on August 8, 1967 by Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand, the ASEAN membership now encompasses Brunei Darussalam, Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

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