

**#ASEAN: This Is ASEAN's Time - Najib  
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KUALA LUMPUR, April 27 (Bernama) -- This is ASEAN's time right here, right now, as community building and deeper economic integration are moulded for a bold, inclusive and forward looking future for ASEAN and its people.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak when addressing the opening of the 26th ASEAN Summit, here today emphasised that 2015 would be a milestone in the history of ASEAN as the vision of creating a single community would be realised by year end.

"This is ASEAN's time right here, right now. Let us work together to ensure that when we say an Asian Century, it is also ASEAN Century," he said in a firm note.

He also said that as Malaysia holds the privilege to serve as ASEAN Chairman once again in a decisive year for the organisation, it was essential for the regional grouping to continue with the measures to establish the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC).

He stressed that it was also high time for the 10-member bloc to find ways for ASEAN to become and to be seen to become more politically cohesive.

"Global investors have long been drawn to India and China. But ASEAN can and should position itself as the 'third force' in the region, and more visibly unity will help us to do so," he said.

Touching on the proposed common time zone, Najib said if adopted by ASEAN throughout the region, it would be a symbol of ASEAN unity as well as good for business.

"Our potential, after all is huge. We already have the third largest workforce in the world. We have a largely youthful, talented and increasingly skilled population of over 600 million people.

"Our burgeoning middle class makes us one of the most potent and dynamic of regions, leading one publication to ask last week if ASEAN was Asia's 'hottest investment'," he said.

Speaking further he said that with the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), barriers to trade would be removed and it goes beyond reducing tariffs.

"It must also include the elimination of non-tariff barriers, such as overly burdensome regulation that hampers free and fair trade," he said.

Najib, who is also the Finance Minister, said ASEAN must accelerate programmes to harmonise standards, increase capital market and financial integration, and promote the freer movement of goods, services, investments and talents between the countries.

"The result of such reforms would be transformative," he said, adding that it had been estimated that if intra-ASEAN trade was boosted to 40 per cent from 24 per cent, the incremental impact on the ASEAN economy could be US\$2.5 trillion annually.

"This potential growth would mean astonishing improvement both to our economies and to the standards of living of our citizens. And those prizes are within our grasp," he said.

Pointing out the vision of the ASEAN establishment as envisioned by the grouping founding fathers through the Bangkok Declaration, Najib said those blessings for all people in the region have never been closer.

"We must make sure however that those ties that bind, and the great ideas that is ASEAN, are a tangible, personal reality for all of our citizens too," he said.

Citing the recent dramatic evacuation of Malaysians from the on-going turmoil in Yemen as an example, Najib said he was gratified that similar exercises were carried out by the other ASEAN Governments as well, and each rendering assistance to the other's citizens, as one.

Malaysia on its part had evacuated its citizens along with the nationals of other ASEAN member countries from Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia.

"This is the spirit of ASEAN," he said.

However, Najib admitted that there would always be differences, though he hoped it would be small, among the member countries, which he noted would be inevitable as the region rejoiced in a multiplicity of ethnicities, cultures and religions.

Nonetheless, Malaysia believed that differences of opinion could be ironed out through tolerance, mutual understanding and respect, which reflected the ASEAN way.

Drawing attention to the recent progress on the Bangsamoro peace process, Najib highlighted the importance of addressing internal conflict within the ASEAN region in order to be a true community.

Elaborating on the ASEAN Community, he said that it was ASEAN's collective duty to formulate a successor document to the road map in establishing the ASEAN Community.

"This will provide the basis for how we further strengthen our unity and deepen our integration over the next 10 years, taking us up to 2025," he said.

Najib pointed out that a People-Centred ASEAN is one in which the region's citizens feel that they are not just part of ASEAN.

"Regardless of where they are - from rice farmers, to forex dealers, halal business owners, fishermen and electronics engineers - our citizens actually feel that they are ASEAN, and its future is their future.

"In order to achieve that we must engage with and constantly listen to them," he said.

Najib said ASEAN also believed that outstanding organisations and individuals who have contributed significantly to the community-building process throughout the years should be publicly recognised.

"With this in mind, I am pleased to announce that later this year, at the 27th ASEAN Summit, we will host the inaugural "ASEAN Peoples' Awards" at which we will celebrate the exceptional achievements of those who are honoured," he said.

Najib reminded that a People-Centred ASEAN must work for the benefit of its citizens both at home and internationally.

The audience at the opening ceremony included leaders and delegates of ASEAN countries, the grouping's secretary general Le Luong Minh as well as Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin and cabinet ministers.

The two-day 26th ASEAN Summit which began yesterday themed 'Our People, Our Community, Our Vision' is held in Kuala Lumpur and Langkawi.

Hosting the event for the fourth time, Malaysia had previously chaired the ASEAN Summits of 1977, 1997 and 2005.

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