

ASEAN must speak with one voice in economic matters - Dr Mahathir

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By Voon Miaw Ping

BANGKOK, Nov 2 -- For ASEAN to emerge as a more prominent organisation and assert its position as an economic power, it must stand together and speak with one voice, especially when dealing with other big economies in the global stage, said Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The Malaysian Prime Minister said it was crucial for all 10 ASEAN member states to pull their strength together when heading to negotiations as it would give the regional grouping more edge, compared to them entering such talk as an individual country.

“If you want to be listened (to), you must be very powerful, strong or very rich, otherwise nobody listens to you. If we function as a regional organisation, as ASEAN, then we have more people to argue in our favour in these forums and when we have more people, we can attend all the meetings and express our views.

“But if you go alone, if Thailand goes alone, it will not be as strong as 10 ASEAN countries,” he said during a dialogue session at the ASEAN Business and Investment Summit held in conjunction with the 35th ASEAN Summit here, today.

The session which was held at the IMPACT Convention and Exhibition was moderated by ASEAN Business Advisory Council Chairman Arin Jira.

Dr Mahathir added that it is also important for the members to agree on a decision prior to heading to such international meetings.

“So together we should speak with one language and before any international gathering, we have to decide what is our stand and we should keep to that stand alone. ASEAN must have one single stand in all international meetings, then they will listen to us. ASEAN is quite a big market for the whole world.

“We don’ t want to go into trade war. But sometimes if they do something not nice to us, we have to be un-nice to them,” he said.

Citing the example of palm oil which faces a ban from the European Union, the prime minister said it was an attempt to sabotage the versatile commodity including by alleging Malaysia is cutting down its forest and destroying the nature habitats in order to open up more oil palm plantations.

“But if you cut down import of palm oil from Malaysia, we will cut down on some of the import from your country,” he said.

Moving forward, Dr Mahathir said, ASEAN should make full use of its 650 million population

and advancement of technology as catalysts to speed up the economic growth in the region.

He noted that this is crucial as ASEAN is not performing as it should have.

“We must make full use of our strength. Our strength lies in our market. We have a market of 650 million people. As our economy grows, we will have a stronger voice. We are going to enter the Fourth Industry Revolution (IR4.0) and this will help us to grow much faster than before,” he said.

The prime minister said while there was so much talk on new digitalisation and new way of doing business to grow the economy much faster, people in ASEAN are still not fully attending to the new method of doing business.

He added that for that to happen, member countries need to educate their people on digital economy and how to respond to new technologies.

Citing an example, Dr Mahathir said China is using its communication technologies to buy and sell its products.

“They are selling much more (products) as they have good domestic market. We too have good domestic market but our people are not upgraded to new technology.

“Therefore, we should create awareness to make sure of the technology to improve their life. Those doing business should make use of digitalisation and equipment in order to communicate and do bigger business,” he said.

ASEAN Business and Investment Summit (ABIS) is a platform for ASEAN governments and sectors to showcase business opportunities, and generate greater awareness on the impact of the emergence of IR4.0 in various dimensions of digital infrastructure, digital connectivity and digital workforce.

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