

Time for Muslim nations to join forces

By Patvinder Singh

Petaling Jaya, Fri: Muslim countries in Asia have the potential to form a powerful economic and financial block and help each other into the "Asian century."

Pakistani Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto said the process has started in a small way but there is still much to be done and hopes that Pakistan and Malaysia can work together for the Muslim community.

She said Muslims must develop common ties and identify areas such as Islamic banking, finance, insurance and transportation for mutual benefit.

Benazir was answering questions from the floor after delivering a talk on *Asia - the emerging economic reality* at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations here.

"If Europe and the United States have dominated the last two centuries, the great continent of Asia is on the eve of the Asian century with East Asia leading the way and West Asia on its heels," Benazir said.

She said countries like Malaysia, Singapore and Japan may surge ahead of the west with greater economic growth and better standards of living.

She singled out Malay-

sia, Indonesia, India and Pakistan as the emerging economic tigers of the 21st century.

"Pakistan is committed to foreign trade, not foreign aid. Pakistan is committed to MoUs, not IOUs," she added.

Benazir said Pakistan is strategically located to help central Asian Muslim countries emerging following the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Urging Malaysian businesses to venture into Pakistan, Benazir said Pakistan's legacy of turbulence is "at long last over and it marches forward as a confident Islamic country."

On South-South relations, Benazir said she looks forward to working with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on improving ties among nations.

She said the Kashmir issue has cast a long dark shadow on India-Pakistan relations.

She said that while she is confident of relations between her country and other South-South nations she wishes that she has the same confidence for Indo-Pakistani ties.

Also present were Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, senior government officials and corporate leaders.