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Asean-Neighbour (news focus)

ASEAN'S PRUDENT AGREEMENT ON MYANMAR

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JAKARTA, Dec 1 (Bernama) -- Asean, ignoring Western pressures against admitting Myanmar, has taken a prudent decision as it moves closer towards getting all 10 Southeast Asian countries into its fold.

Asean leaders agreed here yesterday that Myanmar be admitted as members together with Laos and Cambodia.

Although the actual timing has not been fixed, getting all three in together is the most important thing for Asean as it means reaching the goal of "Asean 10" simulatenously before the turn of the century.

Several European nations and the United States have tried to pressure Asean to take a tougher stand on Myanmar because of its track record on human rights but the grouping opted for a policy of constructive engagement -- building economic and political bridges to Myanmar.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad drove home the point yesterday when he said that other countries had no right to determine Asean's course of action including the question of its membership.

The decision to admit the three countries had also nailed speculation that Asean, which celebrates its 30th anniversary next year, was having differences regarding Myanmar's entry.

Asean leaders and officials said there was no problem on the issue as "everybody agreed that Myanmar should become a full member of Asean."

"Whatever nuances of differences there were in the past was about timing, about exactly when Myanmar would come in," said Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas.

The Asean leaders, who held a one-day inaugural summit here, agreed to request the relevant Asean bodies to continue with the necessary technical and procedural steps before the three countries can join. The countries, in the mean time, would be participating in Asean activities.

Asean has certain technical processes that have to be gone through by prospective members. These include the capacity and capability of their economy to accept the agreed Asean Free Trade Area (AFTA) requirements -- reducing tariffs and eliminating non-tariff barriers and the question of investment.

This means Asean would be looking at the economy of the three countries, their tariff rates and the structure of their economies.

"Vietnam went through it, Cambodia and Laos are going through it and Myanmar is now going through it," said Alatas. Vietnam became a full-fledged member last year.

Myanmar Foreign Minister Ohn Gyaw said the country had changed its political as well as economic and social systems.

"By doing so, we become ready to take part in the affairs of the region as much as what the other countries want us to do and as much as what we want to do for the other countries in the Southeast Asia region," he said.

Leaders of Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar, who were also invited for the informal summit, enhanced their understanding of Asean when they were given a comprehensive overview of the association during a visit to the Asean Secretariat yesterday.

Dr Mahathir said Asean should continue with its policy of constructive engagement with Myanmar as it had brought about changes in the country.

"It is now much more open, it is now willing to have foreign direct investments, it has contacts with Asean where before it was isolationist, practising its own way of socialism," he said.

This is true indeed as Myanmar recently launched "Visit Myanmar Year" -- the government's strongest effort to open the once-isolated country to foreigners.

Hoping to lure up to 500,000 tourists over the next 12 months, Myanmar officials say the main purpose of "Visit Myanmar Year" was to enable tourists to see the situation in the country.

"Please come to Myanmar," its Minister for National Planning and Economic Development David Abel told a group of reporters who approached him for comment yesterday. -- BERNAMA

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