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ASEM MUST NOT REPEAT APEC'S MISTAKE, SAYS RAFIDAH

By: Michael Raj

BANGKOK, Feb 29 (Bernama) -- The Asia Europe Meeting (ASEM) must not repeat the mistakes of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation Forum (Apec) at Bogor Indonesia in fixing a timeframe for market opening measures, the International Trade and Industry Minister, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz said here today.

Rafidah said Malaysia was concerned over such moves for there was nothing to stop leaders at ASEM from casually bringing it up.

"It must be remembered that some things that are brought up at informal meetings such as this can eventually turn up to be something institutionalised," she said.

"We have seen that happen in APEC, so let's not repeat those mistakes in ASEM," she told Malaysian journalists on the eve of the informal summit which brings together 10 Asian and 15 European countries.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who arrived about an hour after Rafidah's briefing, had opposed Apec's move in Bogor to impose a timeframe for members to liberalise their markets.

Malaysia's firm stand, despite being alone, led to APEC laying down a resolution for countries to liberalise their markets but with a clause stating that it must be non-binding.

Rafidah however said that if countries want to commit unilaterally in reducing tariffs, "that's okay... we accept it, but not the notion that it should be binding to all."

She also expressed concern, during the ministerial meeting to be held simultaneously with the summit, that European economic ministers would not be present, as economic matters on Europe, are handled by the European Commission.

Since European foreign ministers follow their leaders to Bangkok, it would be difficult to discuss specific trade or economic issues relating to any individual European country.

She said: "Since we are only meeting Sir Leon Brittain, the commissioner of the European Commission, its okay, he can speak on behalf of the European Union (EU), but individual countries in the EU have their own internal policies with which we do not agree".

"They impose issues such as tropical timber.. it's not an EU thing, so if EU economic ministers are not there, it is difficult to speak on such things," she said adding if foreign ministers can reply to questions on such issues, "then well and good".

However from ASEAN's previous experience with discussions with the EU, not much could be achieved if foreign ministers are asked to talk about the Uruguay Round or investment funds, which actually comes under the operational jurisdiction of the economic ministers.

"It would be useful to have a parallel set-up, including economic ministers, then it would be more meaningful but they (EU) do not have such a structure," she said.

ASEM should achieve a situation whereby the European private sector and those parties which are eurocentric would be made aware of Asia's economic potential, said Rafidah.

Asked how North America would view ASEM, Rafidah said: "I believe they are concerned, curious ... I am sure they are keeping their ears close to the ground to see what is happening".

"I am sure some people would interpret this rightly and wrongly, as a

balancing act by the Asians, that is, we are already in APEC with America and the Americas and we are now in ASEM with the Europeans."

"We (Asia) have our footholds in two big regions, America and Europe," said Rafidah adding that while Asia had ties with America, it was being practical and pragmatic about the realities of its international exposure, hence the forging of closer ties with Europe.

However, Rafidah said Europe should foster economic ties with Asia on the basis of equal partnership and discuss the outdated prospective of Asia being a colony and Europe being the colonial master as was the case during the days after Marco Polo. -- BERNAMA

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