

4 FEB 1996
EAEC - reality
EAEC VIRTUALLY GETS OFF THE GROUND

By: Michael Raj

PHUKET, Feb 4 (Bernama) -- The East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC), has virtually got off the ground when the foreign ministers of the 10 prospective countries met here to achieve an important consensus in talks with Europe.

During an informal meeting last Saturday, they agreed to an indicative list of subjects that their leaders would discuss with European leaders during the historic Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) in Bangkok on March 1 and 2.

Senior officials who convened at this island resort for preparatory talks leading to Asem, said that some countries might not want to admit it, but the reality is that the EAEC had come to stay and served a useful purpose.

The preparatory talks for Asem in Phuket without doubt offered a platform not only for the prospective members to meet, but to arrive at a consensus for a significant meeting with Europe, an Asean diplomat told Bernama.

Besides the seven countries in Asean, the other prospective members of the EAEC are China, Japan and South Korea, but Japan's reluctance to join up fearing a backlash from the United States delayed its inception.

The US resisted the caucus since it was not included, claiming it would be protectionist, when on the contrary, Malaysia mooted it as a loose consultative forum among East Asian countries to discuss common issues.

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has maintained that the EAEC would have a role to play to ensure countries in the region cooperate towards common prosperity while acting as a vehicle for greater economic ties.

In her tireless efforts to explain the aims of the caucus, Malaysia's International Trade and Industry Minister, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, said it could only enhance regional economic integration while contributing towards multilateralism.

The Asean diplomat also said that in discussions among the Asian countries here, Japan, along with China and South Korea, were urged to play an active role in Asean's decision at its summit last year to develop the Mekong area.

If they do so, it would once again be a working relationship between the EAEC's prospective members, but the diplomat said it did not matter what acronym the 10 countries want to use to enhance regional integration.

He said that if they were not happy with the EAEC, it could be called by another name, but what was most important was for the dynamic East Asian economies to have a common platform to thrash out economic issues.

This they did in Phuket at the informal Asian Foreign Ministers meeting and there was no reason why such a fruitful working relationship could not continue, he said, adding the natural evolution of the EAEC was gaining greater momentum.

In a way, while it might have yet to be formally established, the EAEC had got off the ground in an informal sort of way and for an important purpose, that is, finding common ground in talks to forge greater economic links with Europe, he said.

"The EAEC is here to stay," he added. -- BERNAMA