

25 FEB 1996

Asem

EUROPEAN LEADERS MAY STEER CLEAR OF "SENSITIVE" ISSUES AT ASEM

By: Abdul Rahman Ahmad

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 25 (Bernama) -- European leaders may steer clear of issues deemed "sensitive" to their Asian counterparts when both sides meet for the first Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) in Bangkok on March 1-2.

A Malaysian Foreign Ministry source said today European senior officials who met their Asian counterparts in Rome on Feb 8 to finalise the agenda for ASEM had agreed that such issues be avoided.

The source said the European senior officials would forward to their leaders the Asian request that they steer clear of sensitive issues as they might disrupt the summit.

The Asian request was forwarded to the European senior officials by Thailand, the representative of the Asian side, during the meeting in Rome. The European side was represented by Italy.

Among issues deemed sensitive to certain Asian countries are those concerning the former Portuguese colony of East Timor now under Indonesian rule, human rights violations and logging.

According to the source, Thailand informed its Asian counterparts that "the European side has responded to our request that no sensitive issues be raised during the summit so as to save more time for the leaders to discuss matters that are beneficial to all."

The source said the European side had also agreed to an Asian request that no ministerial-level meeting, be it foreign, economic or trade ministers, be held parallel to the summit proper due to time constraint.

The Asian side concluded preparations for ASEM during the two-day informal meeting of the 10 Asian Foreign Ministers in Phuket early this month.

The source said the meeting in Rome agreed to the list of matters to be discussed by the leaders during the summit.

Twenty-five leaders from Asia and Europe will meet face-to-face for the first time, marking a new era of cooperation between the two regions, providing greater opportunities for Asia's vibrant market and for resuscitating Europe's sagging economic fortunes.

The Asian consists of the seven Asean member countries -- Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam -- and China, Japan and South Korea.

From the EU are Austria, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.

It was earlier reported that the European side wanted to raise sensitive issues during the summit proper particularly on human rights.

But the Asian side felt that sensitive issues should be avoided in order not to jeopardise the summit.

The Asian Foreign Ministers' meeting in Phuket also collectively agreed that sensitive issues should be discussed at other forums, not at the summit.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas had said that the summit should not be sidetracked by irrelevant issues which could undermine its success.

He said if European leaders were to raise sensitive issues, their Asian counterparts could do the same.

"I can think of at least 10 issues which could embarrass the Europeans," Alatas said.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said last month that he

might raise the issue of the French nuclear tests in Mururoa and Fangataufa  
atolls in the South Pacific during the summit. -- BERNAMA

ARA LDB