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ASEM-political (news focus)

'FEEL GOOD' MOOD EMERGES FROM MILESTONE ASIA-EUROPE MEET

By: Ahmad Zukiman Zain

BANGKOK, March 3 (Bernama) -- After two days of unprecedented talks here, Asian and European leaders broke new grounds in the quest for deeper region-to-region links based on equality and mutual respect.

While certain quarters had openly admitted of initial scepticism about the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), the triumph of sorts accomplished at the gathering left the leaders feeling good about future ties between two of the most dynamic regions in the world.

Although trade and economic issues were supposed to be the thrust of the summit, political matters were not left out, the most notable being the historic meeting between the leaders of Indonesia and Portugal over the East Timor dispute -- a closely-followed subject especially among the Western media.

But the political issues were significantly dealt with more on the sidelines as controversial subjects such as East Timor were carefully avoided at the leaders-only summit.

In the run-up to the meeting, Portugal was reported to have wanted to raise the issue during ASEM which would have put Indonesia on the defensive. Had this happened, many observers believed the meeting would be disrupted.

The subject "cooled down" when leaders of the two countries held their first meeting in 20 years in an unscheduled bilateral session after a welcoming dinner for all participating heads.

While the meeting between Indonesia's President Suharto and Portugal's Prime Minister Antonio Guterres was described as a 'breakthrough' in the East Timor issue, the coming together of leaders from the two regions generated other notable meetings on the fringes.

British Prime Minister John Major took the opportunity to talk about Hong Kong's future with his Chinese counterpart Li Peng while South Korea and Japan discussed the disputed islands in the Japan Seas.

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad too had informal meetings with several Asian and European leaders on the sidelines.

They included Thai Premier and conference chairman Banharn Silpa-archa, Singapore's Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Austrian Chancellor Franz Vranitzky.

Looking ahead from the success of the gathering, the 10 leaders from Asia comprising the Asean seven-member states plus China, Japan and South Korea and their counterparts from the 15-member European Union (EU) agreed to meet for the next ASEM in London in 1998.

Dealing with the political aspects, the meeting agreed on the importance of enhancing the dialogues between Asia and Europe on general security issues particularly on confidence-building, an element missing from the Asian-American dialogue, the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.

Towards this end, the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty, signed here during the Asean Summit last December, came into focus.

In this regard, France indicated that it was willing to endorse the treaty and wanted to sort out details first.

To promote exchanges between peoples and cultural groups, the meeting agreed that an Asia-Europe Foundation be set up in Singapore with contributions from Asian and European countries.

An Asia-Europe University Programme would also be established to foster

exchanges of students and scholars with a view to developing better understanding of the cultures, histories and business practices of both regions.

According to Dr Mahathir, the European leaders attending the meet had admitted that Europeans knew little about Asia compared to Asians' knowledge of Europe. This was because many Asians had pursued their university education in Europe.

Hence he said European countries could bridge the gap by setting up university branches and twinning programmes in this region not only to cater for Asians but also for Europeans to come here to study.

This would lead to better understanding of Asian value systems, cultures and thinking among the Europeans while setting-up the contacts among future leaders of both regions.

Apart from that, intellectual exchanges between Asia and Europe through the holding of seminars and symposia on international and regional issues and the establishment of networks amongst the appropriate think-tanks from both regions would also be carried out. -- BERNAMA

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