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Mahathir-membership

MALAYSIA TO TRY FOR EARLY VIETNAM MEMBERSHIP IN APEC

By: Muin Abdul Majid

MANILA, 23 Nov (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Malaysia will try to seek for an early Vietnam membership in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) despite a ministerial agreement reached yesterday that new members can only be admitted in two years.

"We can try," he said when queried by reporters whether Malaysia would ask for an exception to be made in the case of Vietnam, whose membership in Asean was being strongly pushed by Malaysia and Asean. Malaysia is also supporting Peru's bid to join the grouping.

Earlier, he had talks with his Australian counterpart John Howard, both of whom are here to attend the Apec leader's summit at Subic Bay on Monday.

Dr Mahathir felt that Vietnam should join Apec as soon as possible because other Asean members -- Brunei, the Philippines, Indonesia, Malaysia, Thailand and Singapore -- were already in Apec.

He reiterated Malaysia's stand that Apec should be open-minded and accept all countries which were geographically within the "Asia-Pacific" area as members.

"We have to do it geographically, let's not be selective...don't say Pacific while we discriminate against some countries," he said.

Apec ministers who had a meeting last night agreed that the process of selection of new members be held in Canada next year and the names of countries selected will be announced at the Apec meeting in Kuala Lumpur in 1998.

On the Information Technology Agreement (ITA), which the United States was trying to lobby for within Apec before being brought to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting in Singapore next month, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia must look after its own interest just as the US was looking after its own.

"The US' interest is to free everyone to enable them to enter any market. But we have a small market and small players.

"And our interest is to protect our companies which are still small. Thus, both parties should not impose pressure," he added.

The ITA is a move by the United States to remove tariff on goods related to information technology by the year 2000.

On the views of some foreign media that Apec was more "active" than Asean, Dr Mahathir said Asean was now having meetings at the top level more often.

On his meeting with Howard, Dr Mahathir said they exchanged views on issues such as Apec membership and their stand on ITA.

He said he had also invited Howard to visit Malaysia next year.

Dr Mahathir said they did not discuss the current racial debate in Australia which was prompted by the call by a member of parliament that Australia stopped accepting immigrants.

"That's her view. I don't think it represents the view of all Australians...there's no point talking about it," he said.

Dr Mahathir also had meetings with Philippine President Fidel Ramos and Mindanao Governor Nur Misuari. -- BERNAMA

MAM AO