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Asean, China back review of UN human rights charter (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Asean and China have reacted strongly against the United States' and European Union's objection to any move to review the United Nations Universal Declaration on Human Rights.

The human rights issue, which was not even on the agenda of the annual meeting between Asean and its dialogue partners, unexpectedly cropped up today, triggered off by remarks from Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on the sidelines two days ago and a retort from US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright this morning.

Dr Mahathir had said in Alor Star on Sunday that Malaysia might submit a proposal to review the UN declaration.

He added that the declaration of 50 years ago was no longer suitable and that Malaysia regarded the West's insistence that developing countries conform to their ideals on human rights, as oppression.

Dr Mahathir said that the West was more concerned about getting votes than helping the poor.

Speaking to reporters here before leaving for Singapore this morning, Albright said that she would fight any attempt to dilute the human rights declaration.

A joint Press conference at the end of the Asean Post Ministerial Conference at Sunway Lagoon Resort Hotel today brought about opposing opinions between Asean Foreign Ministers, joined by China, and US and EU representatives.

US Under-Secretary of State for Economic, Business and Agricultural Affairs Stuart E. Eizenstat said it was unfortunate that the issue had surfaced.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who is PMC chairman, said he felt that the review would be good.

"While some countries may oppose the move because they have strong reasons to do so, we too, have reasons of our own to request for a review," he said.

The declaration contains 30 articles referring to rights of every individual, regardless of race, colour, sex or religion. They include not only civil rights and political rights like freedom of speech, movement and association, but also the right to work and the right to an education.

Abdullah said Asean-member states had discussed the human rights issue based on political experience and expectations.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas expressed surprise about the opposition to the suggestion to review the declaration.

"The suggestion has been immediately interpreted as a dilution of individual rights which I do not think is necessarily or automatically the purpose.

"Everybody knows that the human rights issue does not consist of individual political and civil rights alone. People are now much more aware that economic rights, cultural rights and social rights are just as important," he added.

He added that all these rights formed "a unity" and there should be proportionality in treating them.

"I do not think that given the passage of time, that there is still no place for a review. It is not intended to dilute anything but to see whether we can create a better balance that responds to the real situation.

"There are at least 120 developing countries and newly independent countries which did not participate in the debate to draft the 1948 Declaration on Human Rights," he said.

Sharing Malaysia's and Indonesia's views, Philippines Foreign Secretary Domingo L. Siazon said his country was in favour of a review of every system in the UN.

He added that the review could lead to improvement.

"Though we may not agree on the basic objectives of reviewing it, I think no one should contest the need for a review of any documents or any system after passage of time.

"I think we will certainly support the review of the UN Charters and Human Rights Declaration," he added.

Chinese Vice-Premier and Foreign Minister Qian Qichen who also spoke on the issue had questioned the US' failure to include its domestic record on human rights in reports on the matter.

"I know that the US State Department issues human rights reports on many countries but there is nothing on the US' human rights record," he added.

He also said that China's human rights report on the US was not given any publicity by the American media.

Qian said China had acceded to 17 of the 60 covenants of the declaration, compared with only 15 by the United States.

"If we need to have a uniform standard on the question of human rights, we have yet to have one judge who is capable of determining whether a country is right or wrong as far as human rights is concerned," he added.

Eizenstat who represented Albright at the Press conference, reiterated US opposition to any move to review the declaration.

He said the US found it remarkable that there would be serious efforts to dilute or undermine "the universal values as we are about to enter a new century and leave a century that has known everything from the degradation of World War II that struck Asia so hard, the holocaust in Europe to the killing fields of Cambodia; and that there would be serious efforts to dilute or undermine these values which are not US or Western values, but universal values."

Eizenstat said respect for individuals did not contradict social stability.

Instead, it assured the people of their most fundamental God given rights, he said, adding that the US hoped that no one would try to dilute what was one of the most fundamental set of values that was agreed upon after the Second World War.

Supporting the US stand, Holland State Secretary for Foreign Affairs Michiel Patijn said developed countries' handling of the human rights issue had never impeded growth in developing countries.

He said the EU felt that the declaration was one of the cornerstones of the international political and legal systems and had given direction to international co-operative efforts between developed and developing countries.

"So we are slightly surprised that at the fringes of this conference, is a discussion about reviewing the UN Charter on human rights.

"Let me state that EU is extremely reluctant to embark on such exercise," Patijn said.

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