

08/08/1997

Asean Foreign Ministers to meet in Singapore on Monday

KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Asean Foreign Ministers will meet in Singapore on Monday to discuss the latest developments in Cambodia including the appointment of Foreign Minister Ung Huot as First Prime Minister.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said today any decision to be taken by Asean on Cambodia's political situation would be based on consensus.

Speaking to reporters after attending a dialogue on Asean organised by the Asian Strategy and Leadership Institute at Carcosa Sri Negara, he said Asean was following closely the developments in Cambodia, adding that he was pleased its National Assembly was able to hold a smooth meeting.

This, he said, had shown that the institution was still functioning properly but added that the Assembly's decisions would have to be discussed by the Asean Foreign Ministers.

Abdullah said the meeting would look into the further role Asean could play in Cambodia's political situation.

Yesterday, Prince Norodom Ranariddh was replaced as first prime minister by Ung Huot in a vote at the National Assembly.

Second Prime Minister Hun Sen said the National Assembly's overwhelming approval of Ung Huot signalled the end of Cambodia's turmoil and proved he did not seize power.

The assembly also voted to strip Ranariddh of his parliamentary immunity, clearing the way for his prosecution for alleged crimes if he returned to Cambodia.

The Asean special meeting in Singapore is being convened to discuss the outcome of talks held between three Asean Foreign Ministers with Hun Sen in Phnom Penh recently.

The Asean delegation led by Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas included Domingo Siazon of the Philippines and Thailand's Prachuab Chaiyasarn.

Abdullah said he had met Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday to brief him on the latest developments in Cambodia.

Declining to elaborate, he said it would be improper for Malaysia to state its own views and stance on the matter. "We do not want Asean countries to give conflicting statements on their stance ... maybe there is not even any conflicting view."

Abdullah said Asean was optimistic that it could play a role in Cambodia's political situation.

On whether the meeting would discuss Cambodia's entry into Asean, he said it was not on the agenda.

Earlier in his speech at the dialogue, Abdullah said Asean members must continue to develop and sustain national resilience and promote the regional resilience built over the decades.

"Asean member countries must also remain committed to the principle of peaceful settlement of disputes," he said.

Abdullah said it was also important for Asean to remain a united and constructive force within the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation.

In Phnom Penh, Hun Sen today called on his newly approved co-premier to "cooperate" with efforts to restore peace and stability in the strife-torn country and to protect human rights.

The call came in a congratulatory letter in which Hun Sen wrote: "I strongly hope that Your Excellency, in the position of first prime

minister, will co-operate very well with me in leading the future of our country towards national reconciliation, peace, stability."

The missive, read on national radio today, also called for Ung Huot's "co-operation" in the "continued implementation of democratic pluralism, the multi-party system and the respect of human rights."

Hun Sen stressed that he wanted to respect the 1991 Paris Peace accord which ended decades of civil war here and to work for free and fair elections next year.

In the National Assembly yesterday, 86 of the 99 MPs who were present in the House voted for Ung Huot. Four MPs opposed the move, six abstained and three ballot papers were spoiled.

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