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Anwar-Asean

ASEAN SHOULD ADMIT NEW MEMBERS BY DECEMBER, SAYS ANWAR

KUALA LUMPUR, May 28 (Bernama) -- Cambodia, Myanmar and Laos should be admitted into Asean at the latest in December when the grouping holds its summit, Acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said today.

"There is no question of delaying (their entry)," he said at a press conference after the weekly Cabinet meeting here.

"Our decision has been rather consistent, that their admission should at the latest be by the summit," he said.

He was asked to comment on a report today that the three countries would be taken into Asean at the end of this year, not in July as previously expected.

The report stated that the countries had hoped to join Asean at the seven-member grouping's ministerial meeting here on July 24 and 25. Asean leaders had agreed during an informal summit last year to accept the three countries simultaneously to realise the vision of an "Asean 10".

The membership issue has gained momentum as Asean Foreign Ministers are scheduled to meet here on Saturday to finalise plans to admit the three countries.

Alleged human rights abuses said to be committed by the ruling State Law and Order Restoration Council (SLORC) in Myanmar have prompted calls, including from the Malaysian Muslim Youth Movement (Abim), for the entry to be delayed.

In Tokyo, Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto warned today that Myanmar's expected entry into Asean could be interpreted as a gesture of support for Yangon's military rulers.

Asked about Abim's call to defer the entry of Myanmar, Anwar said the government would have to see the report by Abim to justify their allegations that Muslims were being suppressed in Myanmar.

Abim held a protest here yesterday, saying the suppression showed that the SLORC had no respect for the constructive engagement policy advocated by Asean.

Asked about the call by a Cambodian political party for Malaysia to help bring peace and stability in that country, Anwar said Kuala Lumpur had been supportive in efforts to seek peace in Cambodia.

"The Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has actually assigned the Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi to visit Phnom Penh sometime back and talk to the various political parties and leaders there," he said.

Cambodia's Free Independent Democracy Party president Dr Mohamed Long Bora Abdullah said here yesterday that he would seek Dr Mahathir's assistance in bringing the two factions in his country to the conference table.

On Iran, Anwar congratulated president-elect Mohammad Khatami after his landslide victory in the just-concluded Iranian presidential election.

An official congratulatory letter would be sent to Khatami, he said.

"Although relations between Iran and Malaysia are good, we expect cooperation and ties to be better," he added. -- BERNAMA

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