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Asean shows independent streak with its courageous move

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COME July, Asean is likely to replace Southeast Asia as the name of this dynamic region of 10 countries.

The Saturday special meeting of the Foreign Ministers of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, now made up of Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, has agreed to accept Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar as members.

It began in 1967 as Asean Five but it was later joined by Brunei when it obtained its independence from Britain 16 years ago and Vietnam two years ago. In July, Asean Seven becomes Asean 10, a realisation of the dream of the founders.

The aspiration of Asean to eventually admit all countries in the region as members has been known for a long time.

Saturday's decision was, therefore, a mere reiteration, albeit a crucial one, of a long-known intention. But it had to be made in view of influences being exerted to prevent Myanmar and Cambodia, whose human rights records allegedly are unimpressive, from being admitted.

In Asean, all members have the veto power. It would be embarrassing should a member decide to use his veto during the annual Asean Ministerial Meeting in July in Kuala Lumpur where the decision is to be taken. Thus, the special meeting.

It was a bold decision. Although Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi did not say it in so many words, it was a clear signal to the West that Asean would like to make its own decisions and does what is best for the region. Indeed, he denied it was meant to be a signal.

"We signal to nobody. We just made a decision on what was best for Asean and the region. We have no intention of sending messages to anybody," Abdullah, who is chairman of the Asean Standing Committee, said after Saturday's meeting.

The decision was made after the Foreign Ministers carefully scrutinised the reports of the Asean Secretary-General Datuk Ajit Singh on the readiness of the countries to join Asean.

Asean's move to accept Cambodia and Myanmar was certainly in discord with the wishes of the United States and other Western nations and indicates that the seven-member grouping wishes to pursue an independent line in so far as Southeast Asia is concerned.

It is in fact a signal to the world that Asean has come of age and is no longer willing to be anybody's lackey.

President Bill Clinton, citing "severe repression" in Myanmar, had earlier this month announced economic sanctions against Yangon, which includes a ban on US investments in its oil and natural gas development.

The order prohibits US citizens from entering into contracts that involve the economic development of resources in Myanmar. Americans are banned from purchasing ownership shares in developing resources in the country or helping non-US citizens who wish to perform activities prohibited under the ban.

The European Union imposed a ban on European visits by junta figures from Myanmar.

Cynics have said that Myanmar and Cambodia should not be admitted so soon because of their domestic problems. This, they say, may cause instability in the region.

The military junta in Myanmar is accused of gross violation of human

rights.

In Cambodia, the bitter rivalry between the two Prime Ministers of the coalition Government, Hun Sen and Prince Norodom Ranariddh, gave rise to recent violence.

They say that the two Prime Ministers in Cambodia may have opposing views and are unable to make policy decisions on matters concerning Asean.

But the emphasis so far has been on Myanmar. The US and Europe believe that by isolating the junta, it will force it to improve its behaviour, but Asean members favour a policy of "constructive engagement" combining quiet diplomacy with growing trade and investment.

While affirming the importance of human rights, Asean members fear that a sudden upheaval in Myanmar could sow instability across its extensive borders.

As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said on May 1, Asean can withstand whatever pressure that might be exerted by countries like the US because the group was now more independent and could make its own decisions.

Asean does not believe in exerting force - neither military nor economic. Sanctions against Myanmar will not change anything. For years, the country had isolated itself from the rest of the world, and had survived.

If the US and the European Union think that sanctions would force the State Law and Order Restoration Council to bow to pressure and change, then they are wrong.

Furthermore, if sanctions should hurt, it will only hurt the people. Government officials, like in Iraq, will continue to live a comfortable life.

Sanctions are, by itself, a bigger violation of human rights because although it is aimed at the Government, the people end up as the real victims.

This leads to famine and worst, violence.

Hunger will not sustain democracy, the very system the US is trying to champion. Such is the narrow mindset of the US Government.

But the cynics may not be entirely wrong and their views should not be totally ignored. Asean should hope for the best and expect the worst.

By engaging Myanmar in talks and economic activities, Asean should show that principles of democracy and the free market economy need not necessarily fail.

As a group, Asean would be able to monitor closely and influence the situation in Myanmar better, especially when Myanmar is already a member.

It does not mean that the so-called pro-democratic movement in Myanmar will see its objectives realised, nor will Asean lean towards ensuring that the movement prevails over SLORC or whoever governs the country.

The Asean way of doing things is to ensure a member country does not lag behind in terms of economic development. There are various programmes and projects to help a more backward member to catch up.

It is going to be an uphill task from now on for Asean. It has to work hard to ensure that Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos grow and prosper. Material well-being, after all, has led to sustained peace and harmony in the region.

Asean's 30th anniversary celebrations later this year will certainly be sweeter, lending a new meaning to the phrase "the more, the merrier".

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