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Asean's historic anniversary summit

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NO FORMAL agenda has been fixed for the three-day Association of Southeast Asian nations (Asean) Informal Summit beginning December 14. Officials say the leaders of the nine South-East Asian nations are free to discuss any issues in mind at their meeting and also at meetings with their counterparts from China, Japan and South Korea.

As the informal summit - also known as the Asean Commemorative Summit - is being held at the height of the financial turmoil affecting the region's economies, the finance and economic issues would undoubtedly dominate proceedings.

Foreign ministry secretary-general Datuk Abdul Kadir Mohamad, speaking at a media briefing on the informal summit early last week, described the summit as "a very important one."

"These countries (China, Japan and South Korea) are very important trading and investment partners of Asean and this meeting is being held at a time when the whole region is in a financial turmoil which is affecting the economies.

"I would expect the leaders to discuss and, maybe, agree on certain principles to establish confidence ... and support one another to achieve the objectives of growth and continued prosperity in the region," he said.

Established on August 8 1967 following the signing of the Bangkok Declaration, Asean initially grouped Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand.

Brunei came onboard on January 8 1984, Vietnam on July 28 1995, and Laos and Myanmar July 23 this year. Cambodia is expected to join the fold either next year or before the year 2000.

According to the Bangkok Declaration, the association "represents the collective will of the nations of South-East Asia to bind themselves together in friendship and cooperation and, through joint efforts and sacrifices, secure for their peoples and for posterity the blessings of peace, freedom and prosperity."

The grouping has three main objectives: to promote the economic, social and cultural development of the region through cooperative programmes; to safeguard the political and economic stability of the region against big power rivalry; and to serve as a forum for the resolution of intra-regional differences.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, in his personal assessment of Asean during the 30th Asean Ministerial Meeting in Kuala Lumpur last year, said in its 30 years of existence, Asean not only grew bigger in terms of membership but is also an influential grouping both politically and economically.

It has evolved into a dynamic and pivotal regional organisation.

The nine members of Asean have a combined population of more than 400 million people, a total gross domestic product (GDP) of US\$632.5 billion (US\$1 = RM3.71), a GDP per capita of US\$1,314 and combined exports of about US\$339.2 billion. Over the past year, the Asean economies continued to demonstrate their dynamism and competitiveness.

The last five months, however, have been a trying time for Asean. Out of the nine Asean countries, four - Thailand, Indonesia, Philippines and Malaysia - have come under a barrage of attacks of currency traders since the July 2 attack on the Thai baht. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) has already set foot in Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines as a

result.

Reports showed that Thailand, which led South-East Asian growth in recent years, has already downgraded its official growth forecast to 0.6 per cent this year and 0 to 1 per cent in 1998.

Malaysia has also revised downwards its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth by 7.5 to 7.7 per cent, down from an earlier estimate of 8 per cent. Next year, its GDP is forecast to grow between 4 and 5 percent, down from the previous forecast of 7 per cent.

Singapore, which forecast 5 to 7 per cent GDP growth for 1998, is also reviewing its figures.

This, however, is not expected to dampen the spirit on which Asean is built. Countries in South-East Asia share a primary responsibility for strengthening the economic and social stability of the region and ensuring their peaceful and progressive national development.

In the words of outgoing Asean secretary-general Datuk Ajit Singh: "Anniversaries, like birthdays, are opportune occasions for assessing what progress has been made, where we have fallen short of our goals and for reflecting on future directions.

"... there is no doubt that the various Asean bodies have much to celebrate. At the same time, the challenges in store for Asean poised on the cusp of a new millennium and on the verge of realising Vision '67, are immeasurable, to say the least," he said.

All the heads of states/governments of Asean except Indonesia have confirmed their attendance to the informal summit. Indonesian President Suharto has cancelled a scheduled trip to the summit on doctors' advice.

China will be represented by its president Jiang Zemin, Japan by its prime minister Ryutaro Hashimoto and South Korea by its prime minister Koh Kun.

The informal summit, the Asean Plus Three meeting and the Asean-China, Asean-Japan and Asean-South Korea meetings, will be chaired by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The informal summit will kick off tomorrow night with an informal working dinner, followed by the summit proper on Monday where the Asean leaders are expected to endorse the association's 2020 Vision, a blueprint charting the course of Asean economic, political, security and cultural cooperation for the 21st century.

The Asean Heads of Government had agreed to the formulation of the Asean Vision 2020 at their informal summit in Jakarta last November.

At Monday's meeting, the Asean leaders will go through a report by the Asean finance ministers on the outcome of their December 1 meeting in Kuala Lumpur, which encompasses some recommendations to strengthen the finances and economies of the region.

During the summit, Asean's troika for Cambodia - the foreign ministers of Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines - are also expected to brief the leaders on the latest development there.

"They are doing a lot of work," Abdul Kadir said. "Actually, we cannot keep pace with them on what they are doing with Cambodia or with the United Nations. I believe they will find the opportunity to inform on the latest developments to other Asean members," he added.

Meanwhile, Thai foreign minister Surin Pitsuwan sees discussions on Asean relations with the European Union (EU) as a key issue at the upcoming summit.

Relations between the two groupings would be one of the main issues on the agenda, with Asean nations keen to promote greater trade and investment to Europe. "We will discuss overall relations between the EU and Asean and aim at increasing goods and investment," Surin had said in Bangkok on Thursday after meeting with Premier Chuan Leekpai to prepare

for the summit.

Surin also said Asean would evaluate the outcome of the last Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) held in Bangkok in 1996, and prepare issues to be discussed for the next such summit to be held in London next year.

Another issue to be tabled at the Kuala Lumpur summit is the development of the Mekong river basin, which encompasses Thailand and poorer Asean states of Myanmar, Laos, Vietnam and Cambodia, which has observer status in Asean.

The Asean foreign ministers will also sign a memorandum of understanding for the establishment of the Asean Foundation aimed at accelerating intra-Asean cooperation in various fields such as education while the Asean economic ministers will ink the Protocol to Implement Initial Package of Commitments under the Asean Framework on Services.

After the signing ceremonies, the Asean leaders will meet Jiang, Hashimoto and Koh Kun under the "Asean Plus Three" banner. They will meet the three East Asian leaders individually on Tuesday.

The "Asean Plus Three" meeting is the first between Asean and China, Japan and South Korea, either formally or informally.

Officials are mum when asked if the "Asean Plus Three" meeting is a disguise for the proposed East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC), a loose consultative forum linking Asean countries with the three East Asian nations.

The EAEC was accepted as an Asean initiative at the Fourth Asean Summit in 1992. The modality of the Caucus as a "caucus within the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation" with the Asean Economic Ministers as the prime movers was decided at the 26th Asean Ministerial Meeting in Singapore in 1993.

Reports out of Tokyo on Thursday quoted Japan's Chief Cabinet Secretary Kanezo Muraoka as saying that although Japan and Asean have held informal summit talks twice in the past - in 1977 and 1987 - the upcoming talks may be "a bit different from the previous rounds due to the new economic crisis facing Asean countries."

Japan, he said, will clarify its stance on helping structural reform in Asean countries.

Hashimoto is expected to unveil programmes including provision of low-interest yen loans to assist economic reforms in Asean countries.

Hashimoto will also exchange views on global concerns including environmental issues, security cooperation and the promotion of human and cultural exchanges.

In Beijing, China's assistant foreign minister Chen Jian said "the first informal East Asian summit has significance not only for the region but the world at large." The Asean-China meeting will be a breakthrough as it will be the first meeting between the two sides at head-of-state level.

The Chinese government also agreed to multilateral discussions on the maritime dispute during Jiang's meeting with Asean.

Both China and Asean have come to realise that the dispute over the South China Seas should not adversely affect the development of friendly relations and peace and stability.

"With regard to specific disputes in the South China Sea, these will be settled by the countries concerned through bilateral talks ... but China and Asean can continue to exchange views on how to maintain regional peace and stability.

"In our consultations with Asean in recent years, we have reached some common positions and both sides agree that the issue of the South China Sea should not adversely affect the development of friendly relations.

"From the perspective of maintaining peace and stability, China and Asean would like to engage in an exchange of views on this issue," he

added.

Chen said financial stability is sure to be the major issue and China is in favour of strengthening information flow around the region so that nations could be forewarned of any other impending disasters.

A joint statement to be released at the meeting will "lay out the guidelines for their future relationship. It will underline the need to resolve their difference or disputes through peaceful means without resorting to the threat or use of force," he said.

During the summit, Asean will also confer the Asean Heads of Government Citation to the signatories of the 1967 Bangkok Declaration for "their distinguished leadership, outstanding statesmanship, unwavering courage and vision." The Citation, the highest form of recognition in Asean, consists of a gold medallion and a citation signed by all the Asean heads of state/government.

Of the five signatories - Tun Adam Malik of Indonesia, Tun Abdul Razak Hussein of Malaysia, Narciso Ramos of the Philippines, S. Rajaratnam of Singapore and Tun Thanat Khoman of Thailand - only two are still alive. Thanat Khoman will attend the ceremony while Rajaratnam will be represented at the ceremony together with the other representatives of the three signatories.

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