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Asean-Human Rights

ASIA AND THE WEST CLASH OVER HUMAN RIGHTS REVIEW

KUALA LUMPUR, July 29 (Bernama) -- A clash over a proposal by Malaysia to review the UN Universal Declaration on Human Rights erupted between several Asian countries and the United States and the European Union (EU) here today.

The two Western allies steadfastly objected to the review, calling it a serious attempt to "dilute" the declaration, drawing a heated rebuttal especially from Malaysia, Indonesia, China and the Philippines.

Malaysian Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said that it was time to take another look at the declaration which contains 16 provisions.

"I don't expect the US to say yes, yes and yes. They have very strong views but we do have equally strong views. It is a question of interpretation and a question of perception how we view it.

"When we're talking of human rights, naturally it has something to do with the situation we are in, our own experience and our own expectations and what we want to achieve," he said.

The exchange took place during the joint news conference marking the end of the two-day Asean Post Ministerial Conference here.

Indonesia's Ali Alatas said he was surprised that a suggestion to review the declaration was "immediately interpreted as a dilution of individual rights" because it was not necessarily or automatically the purpose.

"But everybody knows that human rights does not only consist of individual, political or civil rights. It now has grown in perception in the world and people are now much more aware that economic rights, cultural rights and social rights are just as important," he said.

Alatas said there should be "proportionality in treating with all these rights and therefore in the light of the passage of time, I don't think we should be so absolutist in saying that there is no place for a review."

A review would see if a better balance could be created that responded to the "real situation in the world," he said.

Besides, since the declaration was drafted in 1948 after World War II, there were over 120 developing countries who have gained their independence and did not participate in the drafting of the document, he said.

While Philippine Foreign Minister Domingo Siazon also threw his support behind his Asean counterparts, China joined the fray and took a swipe at the US for issuing an annual human rights report of other countries but not producing a country report of its own.

Chinese Foreign Minister Qian Qichen said Beijing has prepared a report of the human rights situation in the US but "I don't see much comment about it in the US media."

Saying that China had acceded to 17 human rights covenants while the US only 15, Qian, speaking through an interpreter, said: "If we need to have a uniform standard on the question of human rights then I think that we have yet to have one judge that is capable of determining whether a country is right or wrong as far as human rights are concerned."

US Economic, Business and Agricultural Affairs Under Secretary Stuart E. Eizenstat, representing Secretary of State Madeleine Albright who left here this morning, said the UN declaration did not represent US or Western values but a set of universal values that respects the individual.

"Respecting the individual is not contrary to social stability or

economic prosperity. It assures people of their most fundamental God-given rights," he said.

Elaborating later, Eizenstat said whatever additional rights to be proposed in the review should not be done in the context of amending the UN declaration that deals with political rights but with social, labour and education rights.

Responding to the comments of the Asean ministers, Eizenstat said there seemed to be a notion that there was a contradiction between individual liberty and economic growth as well as political stability.

"It is a contradiction which does not exist and never has existed," said Eizenstate.

Backing the US, EU representative Michiel Patijn, who is Dutch Deputy Foreign Minister, said the EU was extremely reluctant to embark on such an exercise.

Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer voiced doubts and said it was unlikely that the proposal for the review could gain enough support.

"I don't think it is very likely that we are going to see a complete reopening of the UN Convention on Human Rights. I don't think there would be enough support in the UN system," he said when met after the news conference.

Downer said he was not particularly surprised that Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had called for the review.

"There is a debate about whether there are Asian values and Asian definition of human rights that differ from other countries. There are differences in views within Asia about that," he said.

Malaysian Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said today that Malaysia was only calling for the review of specific provisions while it adhered to the fundamental and universal principles of the charter.

"What needs to be discussed are some specific provisions like economic and social protection and the democratic process...this is a reasonable request," he told reporters after meeting Downer who called on him.

Abdullah said Wisma Putra would follow up on the proposal and submit it to the UN. -- BERNAMA

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