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Asean-Downer (Currency)

AUSTRALIA CONFIDENT OF ASEAN ECONOMIES, SAYS DOWNER

KUALA LUMPUR, July 28 (Bernama) -- Australia has every confidence in the fundamental strength of Asean economies despite the recent speculative attacks on their currencies, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said today.

"I listened with other foreign ministers to what Dr Mahathir had to say...I could only pass on this view, which I did to him, that the Australian government has every confidence in the fundamental strength of the Asean economies," he said.

He was referring to a meeting this morning between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mahathir Mohamad and the foreign ministers of Asean's dialogue partners who are attending the two-day Post Ministerial Conference (PMC) here.

"Asean economies are very big economic partners of ours and any speculation or weakening of those economies would always be a matter of great concern to Australia," Downer told a news conference.

The region's currencies, including the Malaysian ringgit, the Thai baht and the Philippine peso, have fallen in value against the US dollar after speculative attacks by foreign funds.

On the Spratly islands issue, Downer said there was "an expression of goodwill and desire" by China and other parties to negotiate.

"We simply take the view that there is a need for a negotiated settlement, be they bilateral or multilateral," he added. The Spratlys are being wholly or partly claimed by China, the Philippines, Brunei, Malaysia, Taiwan and Vietnam.

Asked on Australia's development assistance to Cambodia, he said it would be maintained for now but should the situation in Cambodia deteriorate or remain unsolved, the assistance programme would have to be reviewed.

On Australia's bid to join the Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem), Downer hoped the second Asem meeting in London next year would make "a decision in principle" regarding the participation of his country, New Zealand, India and Pakistan. -- BERNAMA

MAM JK