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Cambodia must exercise patience, good sense: PM

CAMBODIA can still be admitted into Asean this year if it exercises patience and good sense, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed said.

"We are watching to see the credibility of the process that is taking place in Cambodia. As soon as we are satisfied and they (Cambodia) continue their wish to join Asean ... of course, we will give it serious consideration," he told a press conference after opening the 30th Asean Ministerial Meeting (AMM) in Petaling Jaya yesterday.

When asked whether the admission of Cambodia may take place this year, Dr Mahathir said: "It is possible".

Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas, at another news conference, said there may be a possibility that this might happen by December, when the group holds its commemorative summit in Kuala Lumpur. "It depends on the circumstances and developments in Cambodia."

Sources said Cambodia could even be admitted into the grouping on August 8 if the group is satisfied with the current process taking place there, especially with the National Assembly sitting which is expected to endorse Cambodia's Foreign Minister Ung Huot as the country's First Prime Minister on July 28.

The Asean Foreign Ministers will have to meet to decide on the matter. On Wednesday, they reaffirmed their July 10 decision to defer Cambodia's admission during the meeting due to the political instability there.

Dr Mahathir said Hun Sen sent him a letter, lauding Asean's initiative to address the political instability in Cambodia. Hun Sen also welcomed Asean's initiative with regard to the problem there.

When asked if he had met Ranariddh during his vacation on Europe, Dr Mahathir said that they had only spoken on the telephone. "He called to explain the situation in Cambodia and asked for sympathetic consideration," he added.

Dr Mahathir, reviewing the situation in Cambodia, said Ranariddh was not removed according to a process free from force. "Force was used ... this was not provide for in their constitution."

"If a decision is to be taken to terminate the (services of) the First Prime Minister, it must be done in a proper manner such as through elections," he added.

Asean, he said, welcomes Hun Sen's statement on Asean's initiative on Cambodia but the role the grouping would play be based on the agreement reached between Asean and Cambodia.

"We are trying to be as neutral as possible and at the same time, we also feel there is a need to avoid the use of force in issues like these."

"We should hope that those who are eligible to participate in the national assembly should be able to do so ... free from any form of pressures and coercion," he added.

Asked to comment on Hun Sen's latest announcement that he would go beyond Asean to seek assistance if Cambodia is not allowed into grouping, Dr Mahathir said "(Hun Sen) is entitled to his say as much as we are entitled to ours."

"If we are to react to what others say and not sit down and discuss the issues seriously, there would not be an Asean today."

"Asean depends not on issuing public statements but sitting across the table and discussing ... we are of course entitled to issue public

statements just like Hun Sen, but that is not a form of negotiation."

Dr Mahathir said to join Asean, Cambodia has to meet certain conditions.

"For countries to join Asean, it is for Asean to decide. The countries cannot say that they have a right to join. Asean determines their participation. We do not ask them to do anything except that we have certain views on who can join us."

On whether Asean will send a watchdog committee to Cambodia, Dr Mahathir said: "We have no watch-dogs. We don't intent to set one up."

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