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Differences with Asean an obstacle to better Asia-Europe ties

Ashraf Abdullah in Brussels

POLITICIANS and academicians in Europe as well as those closely observing developments in the European Union share a common belief - that the future of Asia-Europe relations is rather gloomy.

No one in Europe seems to know the exact answer as to whether the outstanding issues which continue to hinder relations between the two sides can be solved before the second Asia-Europe meeting in London next year.

The admission of Myanmar into Asean two months ago has hit a raw nerve in Europe. The EU is adamant that it will not invite the under-developed but resource rich nation to the 1998 Asem and has decided not to issue visas to officials of Myanmar's ruling junta.

To make matters worse, the EU has withdrawn the generalised system of preferences for Myanmar's industrial and agricultural products.

The issue of Myanmar is being vigorously debated in Europe, but a decision is not within sight.

In Asean, at least Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has said that the regional grouping may boycott the 1998 Asem if Myanmar is not allowed to participate.

"If there is discrimination against Myanmar, it is a discrimination against Asean.

"You may find other countries in Asean also deciding not to attend," Dr Mahathir had said.

Dr Mahathir's statement was in response to recent remarks by British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook that the decision to deny visas for senior Myanmar officials rendered their inclusion at the Asem impossible.

Other Asean leaders had repeatedly stated that as a full member of the grouping, Myanmar should be accorded equal status by all.

Whether the decision to deny visas for high level Myanmar officials would be reversed is a question many European politicians and officials rather avoid.

Under the Treaty of Amsterdam, decision on foreign policies affecting the EU member states must be taken by consensus. This effectively means that the 15 EU members should agree in unanimity whether Myanmar should be allowed to participate in the next Asem.

"The problem is EU members feel that Southeast Asian countries are still their helpless colonies," said James L. Janssen Van Raay, a member of the European Parliament representing Holland.

Van Raay, who is a member of European Parliament delegation for relations with Asean, says Europeans still believe in shock treatment, polarisation and exchanging insults. "But I believe in constructive engagement like what Asean believes in," he said.

He agreed with Dr Mahathir that Asean had the legitimate right to boycott the 1998 Asem if one or more of its member states were not allowed to participate.

Van Raay, who visited Yangon recently, feels that there is a growing realisation in Myanmar that a free market economy and democracy will bring about national prosperity and progress.

He hopes, however, that there would be democratic elections in Myanmar in the near future which would put to rest the political uncertainties in the country.

"But for the moment, Asean countries must support Myanmar so that it

could match the success of the other nations in the region which are already in the economic forefront."

Taking a different view, another European member of Parliament Glyn Ford says the withdrawal of the GSP for Myanmar's products was justified.

"The fact remains that we have decided that Myanmar should not be allowed to take part in next year's Asem. This is a problem that we have to agree to differ," he said.

Ford, who represents Britain in the European Parliament, admitted that isolating Myanmar from Asem was a difficult decision because the EU wanted to improve relations with other Southeast Asian nations.

He warned, however, that Asean should not adopt an arrogant attitude as this would affect future relations and assistance from the EU.

"Asean should not turn the EU off and on when ever it wants. But if our relationship does not grow, then we have both made a mistake," he said.

But academicians say that the problems with EU was that it has always practised a culture of discrimination.

"Although Turkey had applied to be a member of EEC (as the EU was then known) since the 1960s, it was never accepted. The chances of it being admitted is remote," says Bruno de Witte, a lecturer at the University of Maastricht.

"The main reason is that Turkey is a Muslim country.

"Although the cultural and religious differences are present, they are not expressed," he said.

Although the decision not to accept certain countries including Turkey is debatable, Asean had never questioned the EU's judgment.

EU also practises discrimination among its own member states. Bigger and more powerful nations in the EU like Britain, France and Germany have 10 votes each but the smaller nations who are already economically behind, have as few as two votes.

Certain important decisions like those involving economic and trade matters are taken through majority votes.

"There should not be proportional representation but equal treatment," argues de Witte.

But some observers say there is a mistaken notion that Asean's economic success is a miracle and not hard work.

A paper of the EU called "The Union's New Trade and Cooperation Strategy on Asia" says the union should step up relations with Asia "for fear of losing out on the economic miracle".

They argue that what was conveniently forgotten was the fact that some of the European states invaded many parts of Southeast Asia and plundered lands with the impunity of a bull in a china shop during the colonial period.

These countries were left in economic ruin. They picked up from there and rebuilt their countries.

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