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Mahathir-Cambodia

DR MAHATHIR SAYS PROBLEMS IN CAMBODIA CAN BE OVERCOME

KUALA LUMPUR, July 24 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has welcomed Cambodian Second Prime Minister Hun Sen's decision to allow Asean to play a role in trying to resolve the Cambodian issue.

The role would have to be agreed upon by Asean and Cambodia, he told reporters after opening the 30th Asean Ministerial Meeting (AMM) at the Sunway Lagoon Resort Hotel, here today.

"If Cambodia accepts Asean to do certain things, we will consider," he said, flanked by Malaysian Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and Ali Alatas of Indonesia, who will continue to lead a three-member mission on the issue.

Hun Sen, who had earlier rejected Asean's diplomatic efforts to help resolve the crisis, had agreed to Asean's role to overcome the issue. Asean, however, maintained its stance to defer Cambodia's admission as Laos and Myanmar joined the regional grouping yesterday, expanding its membership to nine countries.

Asked on the role that Asean could play in resolving the crisis, Dr Mahathir said he would not want to anticipate "because that will tie me to certain actions which I'm not mandated to make."

He believed the problem in Cambodia could be overcome.

"We have faced problems before and we have managed to overcome them. It's a matter of time, patience and good sense," he said.

Asked to comment on Hun Sen's statement that Asean's decision not to accept Cambodia was a "big mistake", Dr Mahathir said Hun Sen was entitled to have his say.

He said Asean depended not on public statements but on "sitting across the table and discussing things."

On the Cambodian national assembly, due to convene on Monday, Dr Mahathir hoped that all those eligible to participate would be able to do so without facing any pressure.

"We are watching to see the credibility of the process taking place in Cambodia. As soon as we are satisfied and if they continue to wish to join Asean, then of course we will give serious consideration," he said.

Asked whether this could happen this year, he replied: "Well, its possible, possible".

Asked to elaborate on the "satisfaction" needed by Asean in deciding Cambodia's admission, he said: "As you know the present government or rather the previous government with its two prime ministers was a result of an international action to try and resolve the problem in Cambodia.

"There was an election...the result of the election was very clear and in order to accommodate all the parties in Cambodia it was decided to have a government with two prime ministers.

"And if that is going to be terminated it must be terminated in a proper way, like through an election," he said.

Asked for Asean's reaction if the national assembly elected Foreign Minister Ung Huot as First Prime Minister to replace Prince Norodom Ranariddh, he said: "We will have to see whether all the members of the assembly are able to participate in it."

Asked how Asean could determine that the process would be conducted in a proper manner, he said Asean could not give an assurance on anything.

"All we are saying is that they must follow the process....they have

the constitution, laws of the country...if you go beyond the law and use force, then it is very difficult for us to accept the legitimacy of such an action," he said.

The prime minister said Asean was trying to be as neutral as possible in the issue and at the same time felt that there was a need to avoid the use of force in settling such issues.

Meanwhile, Philippine Foreign Secretary Domingo Siazon said Asean would not send an observer team to the Cambodian National Assembly which is sitting on Monday.

"We do not have external power to observe how they behave...no, we are not sending our team," he said when asked by reporters after the opening ceremony.

He said the assembly would be a good start for the Cambodian government to reorganise after the political turmoil following fighting between troops loyal to Prince Ranariddh and Hun Sen.

"The assembly will give them time, because they have not met since April and this is the first meeting after the (July 6) fighting," he said.

He, however, said that Asean would not be totally left out of the latest happenings in Cambodia as their ambassadors would report developments in Cambodia to their respective governments.

On the possibility of sending an observer to the national assembly election, Siazon said it is too early to decide.

"We'll wait and see what is the development on Cambodia among the players themselves...they are in the process of consultations," he said, referring to Ranariddh's Funcipec party and the Hun Sen faction. -- BERNAMA

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