

12 OCT 1997

AEM: ASEAN OFFICIALS ARRIVE TO PREPARE FOR AEM

PETALING JAYA, Oct 12 (Bernama) -- Asean senior economic officials arrived here today to begin preparations for the 29th Asean Economic Ministers (AEM) meeting on Thursday.

The two-day senior economic officials meeting (SEOM) would discuss the overall progress towards the realisation of the Asean Free Trade Area (Afta) -- the ambitious single market envisaged by the year 2003.

Minister of International Trade and Industry Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, who would chair the AEM, said recently that some 93 percent or 40,755 tariff lines of the original six Asean members are included for tariff reductions.

An encouraging sign in the creation Afta is that over 85 percent of intra-Asean trade is already at between zero and five percent under the Common Effective Preferential Tariff (Cept) scheme, which is the implementing mechanism for Afta.

SEOM would be chaired by the Secretary-General of the Ministry of International Trade and Industry Tan Sri Asmat Kamaludin, which would also hold dialogues with Australia and New Zealand, Japan's Ministry of International Trade and Industry and the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

Prior to the AEM, the ministers along with Asean Secretary-General Datuk Ajit Singh would attend the Afta Council meeting on Wednesday to be followed by the AEM the following day which would be opened by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Three agreements would be signed during the AEM, including a signing of the protocol of Accession to the remaining agreements in Asean by Laos and Myanmar, the protocol on Notification Procedure and the protocol on the first package of offers under the framework agreements on services.

Asean, which groups Brunei, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, is expected to have a consumer market in excess of 500 million people by the end of the decade.

Among the first to arrive was Laotian director-general for Asean Economic Cooperation, Somchith Inthamith, who reinforced his country's commitment to the December 2007 deadline to dismantle its existing tariff regime for a new one under Afta.

Vietnam, which has been given a grace period until 2006 to join Afta, would be represented at SEOM by its director-general for Multilateral Trade Policy Tran Duc Minh.

Others included Indonesia's director-general of Foreign Trade in the Department of Industry and Trade, Djoko Moeljono, Myanmar's director-general in the Ministry of National Planning in Economic Development, and Maung Maung Yi, Thailand's director-general of the Department of Business Economics in the Ministry of Commerce, Karun Kittisataporn.

Also in the list are Singapore's director-general of the Trade Development Board, Ridzwan Dzafir, Philippines assistant secretary of the Department of Trade and Industry, Edsel T. Custodio and Brunei Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Industry and Primary Resources, Dato' Danial Haji Hanafiah.

Cambodia, whose membership to Asean has been deferred indefinitely due to the political situation in the country, would attend the meetings as an observer.

The meeting would also review the progress on the Asean-Mekong Basin Development Corporation initiatives since its inaugural ministerial meeting in June 1996 in Kuala Lumpur, where the basic framework was adopted. --
BERNAMA

TEAM MR