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AEM: ASEAN COUNTRIES COME TO MALAYSIA'S DEFENCE

PETALING JAYA, Oct 16 (Bernama) -- Asean member countries have come up in defence of Malaysia against allegations it was seeking regional support to introduce controls on currency trading.

"We never discussed controls and Malaysia never asked for support for any kind of controls," Brunei's Minister of Industry and Primary Resources Pehin Dato Abdul Rahman Taib, said.

"What we talked about was how the problem affected some of us and how we are going to face the future," he said in response to questions as to whether Malaysia called for regional support to introduce curbs at a joint press conference after the 29th Asean Economic Ministers (AEM) meeting here today.

Speculation was rife that Malaysia was seeking support from Asean when it circulated a background paper on the problem which Minister of International Trade and Industry, Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz, said was done so so that affected Asean countries and others could draw lessons from the currency turmoil.

To reinforce their defence of Malaysia, Rafidah, who chaired the press conference and the AEM earlier, requested each of her Asean counterparts to reply to the question so as to "solve the issue once and for all."

She said that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's consistent rhetorics following speculative and manipulative attacks against Asean currencies had in fact led many to pay attention to the problem.

This was evidenced by International Monetary Fund (IMF) and even World Bank officials coming to Malaysia to look more deeply into the problem, which Rafidah said was a sign Malaysia was right in its stand.

Indonesia's Coordinating Minister for Production and Distribution Hartarto Sastrosoenarto responded by not saying much, but called on the media to refer to paragraphs 8,9 and 10 in a communique released after the AEM which contained Asean's resolve to overcome the crisis by maintaining the region's economic dynamism, and which drew laughter from those present.

Singapore's Minister for Trade and Industry, Lee Yock Suan, said the background paper had in fact increased the grouping's commitment to strengthen economic fundamentals while raising the region's attractiveness as a destination for foreign direct investment.

Rafidah said she hoped that with the acknowledgement by all the Asean countries to the media, it would put to rest the issue.

She said Malaysia had not made any unilateral decision to curb currency trading but only served to expand the parameters in which the problem needs to be discussed such as through the IMF or World Bank.

Elaborating on the initial package of offers by Asean to liberalise its services sectors, Rafidah said the grouping decided to adopt an alternative approach whereby offers would be made based on a sectoral basis rather than on a product basis.

This means the liberalisation package would cover all services sectors and sub-sectors, she said, adding that for transport, the offers were made by Brunei, Singapore and Malaysia, business enterprises -- the Philippines, maritime transport -- Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand, telecommunications -- Vietnam, while for tourism, offers came from all countries.

On Dr Mahathir's call for Asean to look at itself from a new perspective, Philippines' Bautista said it was relevant as the grouping has to consistently take into account dynamic changes... we cannot make

decisions tomorrow based on yesterday's standards." -- BERNAMA
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