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Spratlys: KL to consult Asean on China's offer

MALAYSIA will consult the other members of Asean at its informal summit in December on China's offer to jointly develop the Spratlys, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said.

Malaysia believes the offer by China should be best discussed at the informal summit as the overlapping claims on the Spratlys off the South China Sea involve four of the nine Asean members namely Vietnam, the Philippines, Brunei and Malaysia, he said.

The other members of the grouping are Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, Laos and Myanmar. The nine leaders will have the informal summit in Kuala Lumpur.

Chinese premier Li Peng had conveyed the offer to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during his four-day official visit to Malaysia last week.

Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, who is on a four-day official visit to Malaysia, is the first Asean leader to be informed of China's offer to settle the dispute over the Spratlys.

Dr Mahathir had informed Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of China's offer and views on the overlapping claims over the Spratlys during a delegation meeting in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Dr Mahathir, according to Abdullah, told the Sultan that Malaysia has yet to make a stand on China's offer and that it is only proper to listen to views from all Asean members, especially those involved in the overlapping claims, before coming up with a decision.

"It is not that we (Malaysia) cannot develop the region with China but there are problems pertaining to the overlapping claims in South China Sea and security in the region.

"Furthermore, the Spratlys issue does not only involve China and Malaysia alone but there are three or four countries making similar claims over the islands at the same time.

"As such, Dr Mahathir said it is better for us to discuss this as well as listen to views from other Asean leaders during the informal summit. We do not want to lead in making a stand on China's offer.

"In this regard, the decision to be taken by Asean will be through consensus," he said.

Li, during a one-on-one meeting with Dr Mahathir last Friday, indicated China's willingness to jointly explore the economic development of the Spratlys rather than determining which countries have rights on the islands.

The Chinese premier had also said that it would take a long time to solve the territorial issue in South China Sea and that it should be settled peacefully through the use of international laws and the Convention of the Laws of the Sea.

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