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US backing for grouping's efforts

Zainul Arifin in Vancouver, Canada

THE United States is expected to pledge support to the current efforts undertaken by Asean nations to address financial problems confronting them.

The message is expected to be delivered during a meeting between President Bill Clinton and Asean heads of government on Monday. The leaders are here for the annual meeting of Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum.

"It is appropriate for us to give support due to the financial difficulties in the region," a US States Department official said here on Saturday.

Currency problems that started in the region a few months ago had spread throughout Asia, with its repercussions reverberating worldwide, including the US capital market.

"It is self-apparent we also have our interest at stake, and not just as a distant observer," the official said.

He said Clinton was also expected to re-affirm Asean's importance to Washington.

The recent summit between the United States and China, as well as the current peace efforts in the Korean peninsula, might have given the impression to Asean nations that the relationship between Washinton and the region was placed on the backburner.

Asean, he said, was a strategic partner to the United States as was seen through their co-operation at venues such as the Asean Regional Forum.

Meanwhile, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is expected to keep a rather busy schedule during the duration of his stay in the city.

He will have a bilateral meeting with Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai. It will be followed by dinner with business leaders of Apec, at which he will deliver a keynote address.

Dr Mahathir will join Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien today for a tour of a youth media centre to be followed by a bilateral meeting.

This will be followed by a joint meeting between Asean leaders and President Clinton.

He will be at an informal lunch meeting with leaders of Asean countries which are Apec member economies.

This will be followed by a dialogue, together with all other heads of government, with the Apec Business Advisory Council.

Tomorrow Dr Mahathir will be at the University of British Columbia to attend the Apec leaders retreat.

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