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Asean-Summit  
ASEAN'S DREAM MAY FINALLY COME TRUE IN VIETNAM

By: E. Sivabalan

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 4 (Bernama) -- Southeast Asian leaders will rendezvous in Hanoi this month to realise Asean's long-cherished dream of a united region but the debate over the prickly issue of "non-interference" may create a nightmare for the 31-year-old regional grouping.

"The prospects of achieving the founding fathers' long-cherished dream of uniting all 10 Southeast Asian countries under one roof (Asean) will soon be realised, hopefully in Vietnam," an Asean diplomat based here said.

He said the progressive construction of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations or Asean since its inception in 1967 from five to 10 members would then be completed.

Vietnam will host the Sixth Asean Summit scheduled for Dec 15-16. The summit will be the first for Indonesia's President B.J.Habibie and Philippine President Joseph Estrada.

Asean currently groups Brunei, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam with a combined population of 500 million people.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is scheduled to attend the summit, the first to be held in Hanoi since Vietnam joined Asean in 1995.

The spotlight will be on Cambodia which will become the 10th and the last Southeast Asian country to be admitted into the regional grouping thus completing the 31-year-old jigsaw puzzle.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had said that Cambodia's entry into Asean would be decided at the Hanoi summit and its chances were "brighter" now that the country has a legitimate government.

But not all Asean countries are in favour of admitting Phnom Penh into the club so soon as it remains to be seen whether Cambodia's political situation will stabilise.

Malaysia and Vietnam were reported to be in the forefront in pushing for Cambodia's admission into Asean at the Hanoi summit while the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand were reportedly taking a reserved stance.

Singapore, as head of the Asean Standing Committee, has been assigned to arrange a meeting among Asean foreign ministers to consider Cambodia's admission.

But, Singapore Foreign Minister S.Jayakumar said he had no plans to convene a meeting. He will however consult his Asean counterparts on the possibility of admitting Cambodia in time for the group's summit in Hanoi.

Over in Bangkok, Thai Deputy Foreign Minister Sukhumhand Paribatra was quoted as saying recently that Asean ministers may decide just to discuss the issue over the phone.

Asean foreign ministers are scheduled to meet in Hanoi on Dec 12 to prepare for the summit.

Analysts say that although there may be disagreement within Asean on Cambodia's entry, it had been the grouping's policy to discuss such matters behind closed door and reach decisions based on consensus.

However, that consensus which forms the grouping's "constructive engagement" policy is now being severely tested since the region was hit by the financial and economic crisis followed by political upheaval in some member states.

Thailand recently questioned Asean's policy of non-interference in

members' internal affairs and moved toward a more outspoken position of "flexible engagement" which encourages talks on political issues of mutual concern.

Analysts said the change of stance prompted in part by Asean's acceptance last year of Myanmar, has since won backing from the Philippines.

But Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore were reported to have opposed the idea as they fear it would undermine relations between member states.

Their views, analysts said, were shared by the remaining Asean countries.

"There is fear now among some of the Asean countries that by allowing open discussions on sensitive issues, you are actually breaking up the grouping.

"This will allow foreign elements to come in and destroy Asean. As it is, there is already signs of alleged foreign intervention in the internal affairs of some member states," said one Asean diplomat.

However, Indonesian Foreign Minister Ali Alatas said while his country would stick to the constructive engagement policy, "a distinction should be made between a personal opinion about the condition of someone and intervention."

He was referring to Habibie's concern over the arrest of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim at the height of Anwar's trial early last month.

But, the stakes are too high for the Asean leaders to divert their attention from the real issues confronting Asean -- economic recovery.

A Foreign Ministry official said the leaders would be "mature enough" not to let these issues sidetrack them from their economic agenda.

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