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`Asia should be Europe's priority'

EUROPE should make Asia's problems its priority when leaders of the Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) meet in London later this week, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz said.

"Our problems must be Europe's priority if they really observe Asia-Europe spirit," she told reporters when asked if she thought the second Asem (Asem-2) in London from April 2 to 4 could assist in solving the regional economic problems.

Rafidah said Europe must understand the problems facing the Asian members of Asem and assist them in solving the regional economic problems.

She said while both groups are looking at various potentials for the future, Europe cannot ignore the present problems faced by Asia, especially countries in East Asia.

"We don't discuss the future without solving the current problems," she said after opening a two-day workshop on "The Implications of Uruguay Round Agreements for International Trade in Technology-based Products" in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

Rafidah, together with Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, will be in the delegation headed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to attend Asem-2.

She said Europe is in a position to not only extend financial but also technical assistance as well as open up its markets to Asian products and services.

Rafidah said Asem-2 will pursue issues discussed at the inaugural summit in Bangkok, such as cooperation in investment and trade.

"The trade ministers also outlined at their meeting in Japan last year technical cooperation programmes such as human resource development as well as cooperation in preventing and overcoming natural disasters such as flooding and forest fires.

"Hopefully, all these will be discussed in London," she said.

Rafidah said like Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation, Asem is a non-binding organisation and there will be no agreement that ties the countries.

"Should there be a resolution coming out from this, we can abide by it ... But there should not be any formal agreement that ties us down," she said.

Apart from Malaysia, other Asian participants are Brunei, China, Indonesia, Japan, Philippines, Singapore, South Korea, Thailand and Vietnam.

Europe groups the 15 members of the European Union; namely, Austria, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain and Sweden.

The European Commission is also a member of Asem.

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