

09 JAN 1998

US-Asia

DEFENCE SECRETARY COHEN'S ASIAN TRIP IS ON AGAIN

By: Salmy Hashim

WASHINGTON, Jan 9 (Bernama) -- United States Defence Secretary William Cohen's on-off trip to Asia is on again beginning Saturday with a fast-paced 12-day tour of seven nations, including Malaysia, to assure them that the US would stand by them during these difficult and uncertain period.

Cohen's trip was originally scheduled for Nov 12-23 last year, but postponed because of the "crisis" with Iraq which earlier refused to allow US officials in the United Nations team involved in the search for weapons of mass destruction in that country.

Dr Kurt Campbell, deputy assistant secretary of defence for East Asian and Pacific Affairs, said here Thursday that the defence secretary's trip to Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand, China, Japan and South Korea demonstrated Washington's commitment in Asia in "good times as well as in these difficult and uncertain times."

He reiterated the US position that it "is deeply engaged and committed not just now, but in the future."

Cohen will engage in security dialogues with leaders and counterparts of countries he will visit, and sign in Beijing the recently-concluded military maritime agreement. He will be accompanied by senior officials from the White House, Treasury and the State Department.

The maritime agreement essentially sets out guidelines on how the US and China will interact when their navies come in proximity with one another in international waters.

In a background briefing on the trip, a senior US defence department official said Cohen will make Kuala Lumpur his first stop where he is scheduled to meet Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim. Discussions will centre on defence and security issues as well as the critical economic situation in Asia.

During his two-day visit to Kuala Lumpur from Monday, he will participate in the Pacific Dialogue, a charter group of key statesmen from the Asia and Pacific rim, to talk about issues of mutual concern both in the Asia and Pacific region.

Cohen will depart for Jakarta on Tuesday where he will have consultations and meetings with his Indonesian counterpart and a private meeting with President Suharto.

On the critical economic situation in Indonesia following the plunge on the rupiah in the past few days, the official said the US was confident that the Indonesian government would "demonstrate domestic restraint" to prevent social unrest.

"The most important point is to assure Indonesia that we're a partner; that we are with Indonesia both economically, politically and strategically, and that we have our differences and our difficulties. But the US is committed to having a solid and stable relationship with the government of Indonesia," the senior official said.

In Singapore, Cohen will deliver a keynote address at the opening of a new strategic studies institute, and then on to Thailand where he will call on the king and engage in defence and security discussions with his counterpart.

His trip to Southeast Asia, from the security perspective, is to increase "our ability to train ... to look at joint endeavours, both in the humanitarian and military realm, and to exchange views on strategic

perceptions. Those are all the things that we think are very important," the official said.

Asked if the financial crisis in the region had resulted in the cancellation of defence orders, the official answered in the negative, but added that countries affected had requested for a dialogue on the options available such as long-term payments to ensure a strong and stable defence relationship with the region.

"The US will do what it can to assist. (US defence firms) know that those companies who stand firm with countries during difficult times are remembered when times are not difficult " he said.

Several of the countries in Asia have in the last two or three years set out on very ambitious modernisation plans, both in terms of procuring sophisticated aircraft, surface combatants and other weapon systems.

"I think we, wherever possible, want to work with those countries, both as a government and also to encourage the US private industry to work with these countries to come up with financial and other arrangements that are suitable, that meet their needs," the official said.

He added that the US standing as a steady and reliable partner and supplier of defence equipment and technology was critical for the US to maintain its position as an Asia Pacific player.

In Japan, the defence secretary is expected to intitial a US-Japanese agreement on how to make the defence guidelines a reality, and continue discussions on the reduction of US facilities in Okinawa.

In South Korea, Cohen will meet the new president for the first time and to assure that country that the US would stand by them through this difficult period. --BERNAMA

SH SK