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`Don't rely on foreign aid to overcome woes'

Marina Tan

PETALING JAYA, Wed. - Asean countries must help themselves out of poverty and current economic problems instead of relying on foreign assistance, an Indonesian Cabinet Minister said today.

Indonesia's Co-operatives and Small-Scale Businesses Minister Adi Sasono said the regional currency problem had hampered and, in some instances, reversed efforts by governments to eradicate poverty among their people.

"In Indonesia, efforts to eradicate poverty had been largely successful and we reduced the percentage of the people living below the poverty line from 65 per cent of the population to 11 per cent.

"In the last nine months, however, we have seen the number of poor people increasing threefold," he said at the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding between two non-governmental organisations to eradicate regional poverty.

Attributing this phenomenon partially to the "unfairness of the world of international finance", Adi said: "It is painful to see, but we must face it as a trial from Allah and we cannot give up in the fight against poverty."

Adi said discussions with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim yesterday had concluded that Asean countries should depend on themselves to get out of economic problems.

He later witnessed the MoU signing between the Selangor Poverty Eradication Foundation and Indonesia's Centre for Information and Development Studies.

Adi, a leading Indonesian intellectual and long-time chairman of CIDES, was the only NGO representative to be appointed to president B.J. Habibie's "reform" Cabinet a month ago.

The MoU, signed by SPEF general manager Mohd Tamin Mohd Yusof and CIDES assistant chairman Ricky Rachmady, identifies 10 areas of co-operation for the two NGOs to strengthen regional poverty eradication efforts.

They include research and development, comparative studies on poverty eradication issues, developing small-scale local entrepreneurs, organising barter trade activities and exchanges of experts and welfare activists.

Adi left for Indonesia later this afternoon.

Present were former Chief Secretary to the Government Tan Sri Ahmad Sarji Abdul Hamid, SPEF chairman Datuk Zainal Abidin Sakom and Kelana Jaya State Assemblyman Datuk Mokhtar Ahmad Dahlan.

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