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Dr M to call on Asean `friends`

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who leaves today to visit Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore, refers to his trip as an opportunity to call on some "friends" while updating himself on the situation in the region.

"I will be calling on my friends Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai, President (Fidel) Ramos and Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong," Dr Mahathir said at a joint press conference with visiting Egyptian businessman Mohamad Al-Fayed in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

His deputy and Finance Minister Datuk seri Anwar Ibrahim will meanwhile leave for Jakarta to meet Indonesian President Suharto and Finance Minister Mar'ie Muhammad and travel to Japan and Taiwan next week.

"We are taking the liberty as neighbours to follow up on the visit by Dr Mahathir a few weeks ago.

"I will be briefing the President on measures taken by Malaysia and seek his views on those taken by the Indonesian authorities... we compare notes time to time," Anwar told reporters after opening the third Regional Ethics in Leadership Conference in Kuala Lumpur last night.

Dr Mahathir visited Jakarta on January 17 and had a 90-minute discussion with Suharto on the need to upgrade trade cooperation in the wake of the economic problems caused by the depreciation of the region's currencies against the US dollar.

On plans for Asean finance ministers to meet ahead of the upcoming Group of Seven Summit in London on February 21, Anwar said: "Yes, we are firming up on the date... it should be very soon."

Asked whether the meeting would be held in London, he said: "Why should it be in London. It is very expensive. The Asean ministers will meet in an Asean country."

Dr Mahathir, when asked about Washington's plan to rule that Petronas is "sanctionable" over its participation in a joint venture in Iran, said so far the US has not done so.

"If they impose the sanctions equally... we have no objections," he said.

It was reported that the US was set to rule that France's Total, Russia's Gazprom and Petronas - partners in a US\$2 billion (US\$1 = RM3.96) Iranian gas project - could be sanctioned under its D'Amato law passed by the US Congress last year.

Under the Iran-Libya Sanctions Act sponsored by Senator Alfonse D'Amato of New York and passed by US Congress in 1996, the US Government may impose sanctions on any foreign company investing more than US\$20 million a year in the energy industries of Iran or more than US\$40 million in that of Libya.

On whether foreign banks are buying stakes in Malaysian banks, Dr Mahathir said: "There are rumours... it is possible."

Talking to Reuter on his trip to Tokyo and Taipei earlier, Anwar said he would discuss the possibility of Japan taking "a greater lead and responsibility in the region."

He said Malaysia and its South-East Asian neighbours believe Japan should play a greater role in helping ailing economies in the region.

As for Taiwan, he said he had clarified to China that it would be a purely private trip to discuss the region's current economic situation.

Anwar said while in Tokyo he would discuss "some other measures that we

are planning together... making sure that the Japanese are more forthcoming and effective in their programmes, both nationally in terms of their reform package, and also to take a greater lead and responsibility in the region".

He said he had written to the Japanese Government expressing the sentiments shared by his Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) colleagues.

Asked if he thought Japan was not doing enough to help the region, he said: "I think there is room for improvement, and I think they should be more forthcoming compared to what has happened in the past, although I do certainly welcome their speedy and effective support, particularly for Thailand and Indonesia."

Tokyo has supported rescue packages for Thailand, Indonesia and South Korea which were crafted by the International Monetary Fund.

But Asean member states want Japan to stimulate its sluggish economy and adopt a higher profile in efforts to pull the region out of its seven-month tailspin.

Anwar also expressed confidence that Asia's economies would emerge from the financial crisis faster than anticipated.

"With the understanding among countries in the region, I think recovery will be faster, swifter than many have anticipated," he said, adding that it could be as swift as the decline in the region's share prices and currencies had been.

"I have lots of confidence because measures that have been taken (are) not just confined to national strategies," Anwar said. They are more like a regional and concerted response to the challenge, he added.

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