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Japan heads for Hanoi with basket of goodies

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JAPANESE Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi will head for the Asean summit in Hanoi next week carrying with him good news for leaders of Asean nations facing economic problems.

Armed with approvals for several individual projects that can help revitalise certain sectors of respective Asean economies, Obuchi is expected to unveil them to leaders of the nine-nation group during the Asean-Japan meeting.

Japanese Foreign Ministry Deputy Press Secretary Masaki Okada said yesterday that Obuchi would be able discuss concrete ways of assisting the Asean economies as Tokyo was finalising many of the projects that had been discussed bilaterally with individual Asean nations.

The Diet is also scheduled to pass the third Supplementary budget in the next few days which includes part of the loan package to help out Asian countries facing financial difficulties.

In October, Japan announced the "New Miyazawa Initiative" totalling US\$30 billion (RM114 billion) which is in addition to the US\$44 billion aid from Tokyo to Asian countries announced in July last year. A joint initiative by Japan, the US, the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank worth US\$5 billion was also announced on Nov 16.

Okada said detail proposals on the assistance needed for Malaysia had been received by Japan early this month and officials were now examining it.

This followed several missions by Japanese officials to Kuala Lumpur to discuss the proposals which include several projects discussed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad with Obuchi in Tokyo.

Okada said Japan's hoped to disburse the funds for the Malaysian projects by end of this year if discussions on the proposals were completed on time.

Malaysia is one of the five countries targeted by Japan for the aid plan besides Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia and South Korea.

Okada said Obuchi was keen to strengthen relations with Asean and the Asean summit would give him an ideal opportunity to hold discussions not only with the nine Asean leaders but also leaders from South Korea and Japan.

"We want to enhance dialogue with these countries so that Japan can contribute to the Asean Vision 2020 and also the Hanoi Plan of Action expected to be issued at the end of this year's summit."

He said although the inclusion of Cambodia into the grouping was an internal issue of Asean, Japan nevertheless hoped that this would be done as soon as possible as it would contribute to stability in Cambodia and also the region.

Asean foreign ministers are expected to discuss Cambodia's entry tomorrow, ahead of the grouping's Dec 15 and 16 summit.

In a bid to further promote and strengthen Japan-Asean relations towards the 21st century, Obuchi is expected to propose several concrete measures which he would discuss with Asean leaders.

Okada said Japan also wanted to improve co-operation for "human security" which includes helping to combat drug trafficking, terrorism and stop usage of land mines apart from being involved in social programmes such as helping the socially vulnerable. These issues would be brought up during discussions with Asean leaders.

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