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Mahathir-Severino

MAHATHIR CALLS FOR COOPERATION TO COMBAT HAZE

KUALA LUMPUR, April 16 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has stressed the necessity for Asean to work together to overcome the haze problem as it affects everyone in the region.

Asean Secretary-General Rodolfo Severino Jr said today this was conveyed by Dr Mahathir to him when they met at the Prime Minister's Department here.

"He (Dr Mahathir) also stressed the need to mobilise international assistance," Severino told reporters after he called on Dr Mahathir.

Apart from the haze situation, they also discussed Asean's current financial and economic difficulties.

Severino said that the recent Asean environment ministers meeting in Brunei decided to designate the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to be the focal point for coordinating international assistance.

"The external assistance has to be coordinated very well to avoid wastage and duplication, and also to ensure that the requirements are met," he said.

Severino said Asean had entered into a programme with the Asian Development Bank to work out measures for long-term external assistance such as research and training.

"They've agreed to set up a research and training centre at a university in central Kalimantan and there are various offers of fire-fighting equipment to deal with the present situation," he said.

Haze is creeping back to several countries in the region following widespread forest fires in Indonesia and certain parts of Malaysia due to the current dry weather.

At the meeting in Brunei, Asean decided to establish two fire-fighting arrangements for Kalimantan and Sumatra/Riau provinces in Indonesia.

When asked whether he discussed the problem of illegal immigrants with Dr Mahathir, Severino said the matter was not brought up.

"We just discussed the impact of the (financial) crisis on the region...some of the elements of the crisis are not the fault of the countries concerned or even the companies involved. And yet, everybody suffers," he said.

He said that was why Asean needed to have a collective voice in addressing the problem on the international scale.

Severino, assumed the post of Asean Secretary-General last January for the 1998/2002 term, succeeding Malaysia's Datuk Ajit Singh.

He is here to attend the two-day Asean-China senior officials meeting beginning tomorrow.

Asean comprises Brunei, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam. -- BERNAMA

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