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New Year gift for Cambodia?

Ashraf Abdullah in Hanoi

LEADERS attending the Sixth Asean Summit in this Vietnamese capital extended a warm welcome to Cambodia as the 10th member of the grouping, saying that Cambodia's impending admission would come at a time when the association needed all the strength it could muster.

Asean leaders decided on Monday that Cambodia would be admitted into the regional grouping at a special Foreign Ministers meeting to be convened in Hanoi as soon as possible.

However, the leaders did not set a specific date for Cambodia's admission.

The decision to admit Cambodia had already been made in Kuala Lumpur last year. The Foreign Ministers had been entrusted by the leaders to decide on the timing of its entry.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi when asked when Cambodia would be admitted, said:

"I hope it will be a New Year gift to Cambodia. We want Cambodia to be in Asean as soon as possible."

An Asean 10 was envisaged by the grouping's founding fathers in 1967. With Cambodia's entry, all Southeast Asian nations will be represented in the association.

In his opening speech, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Malaysia would welcome Cambodia's admission at a special ceremony to be held in Hanoi later.

Malaysia, along with Brunei, Myanmar, Laos, Indonesia and host Vietnam had pushed for Cambodia's immediate admission.

However, at a dinner meeting on Monday, the leaders decided not to admit Cambodia at the current summit, but to do so in the near future.

Cambodia's scheduled admission into Asean in Kuala Lumpur last year was deferred after Prime Minister Hun Sen ousted his then co-Prime Minister Prince Norodom Ranariddh, in a power struggle that led to bloody clashes in Phnom Penh.

The two rivals agreed last month that their parties would form a new coalition. The Government headed by Hun Sen was sworn in recently.

Following this development, the UN credentials committee voted in favour of accepting Cambodia back into the UN last week.

In his opening speech, Vietnam's Prime Minister Phan Van Kai said the decision of the Asean leaders to admit Cambodia made it possible to fulfil the vision of Asean 10, enhanced Asean's strength and international standing, and contributed to strengthening peace, increasing co-operation and promoting development in Southeast Asia.

"Following an open exchange of views, the Asean leaders decided to admit Cambodia as the 10th member of Asean and has instructed their Foreign Ministers to organise a special admission ceremony in Hanoi," he said.

Phan said Vietnam welcomed the success of the free and fair election in Cambodia last July.

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