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No consensus on Cambodia's entry by Asean leaders

Ashraf Abdullah in Hanoi

ASEAN leaders failed to reach a consensus to admit Cambodia into Asean at the Sixth Asean Summit, but agreed to do so in the near future.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, when approached by reporters after the dinner for leaders of the Sixth Asean Summit last night, said: "Yes, we have a consensus but there are variations. I cannot announce it," he said.

Philippines President Joseph Estrada said Cambodia would be admitted at a proper time, but not at the current summit.

Its Foreign Minister Domingo Siazon said Cambodia would not be sitting as a member when the summit begins today.

An official announcement is expected today.

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 last Monday.

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

Cambodia is pushing ahead for an early entry into Asean to win early international acceptance and aid.

While Malaysia, host Vietnam and others, were in favour of accepting Cambodia into the fold at this summit, Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines were against it.

They felt that Cambodia's Government was too new and its senate had not been formed.

The Asean Foreign Ministers failed to reach consensus on Cambodia's immediate entry last week.

Hun Sen and Ranariddh agreed on Nov 13 to form a new coalition. Under the coalition pact, Hun Sen agreed to back Ranariddh as president of the National Assembly while a new senate will be formed.

Cambodia became an observer in Asean in 1995.

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