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Asean (News Focus)

ASEAN SEARCHES FOR NEW WIND INTO NEXT MILLENNIUM

By: Tham Choy Lin

SINGAPORE, June 13 (Bernama) -- After serving more than three decades as a pillar of Southeast Asia, Asean is searching for a new wind to sail into the next millennium and to hold the glue together on the regional grouping.

A group of 10 prominent individuals from the region gathered here this week for its first meeting to brainstorm ideas to steer the now 32-year-old bloc into the future as it faces more divisive challenges.

The Asean Eminent Persons' Group (EPG), with one representative from each member country, faces a formidable task amid the economic and political changes that had hit the region since the Asian financial crisis struck two years ago.

On the conference table was the Vision 2020 blueprint endorsed by Asean leaders for a secure and prosperous Southeast Asia, home to half a billion people and an economic jewel before the crisis struck.

Opening the meeting, Singapore Foreign Minister S.Jayakumar said: "These are difficult and yet challenging times for Asean. As distinguished members of the EPG, you have the important and vital task to provide insights and ideas to guide our leaders in planning for Asean's future."

Asean's membership reached a full 10 with the admission of Cambodia this year. The others in the grouping are Brunei, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Malaysia's representative, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin Sulong, who was closely associated with Asean in his 30-year stint with the Malaysian foreign service and was the Foreign Ministry secretary-general before his retirement, brushed aside suggestions that more members meant a harder time for Asean.

"There are all sorts of analysis being talked about by experts that with a bigger group, there are inherent difficulties. I don't think so.

"We're meeting all sorts of new challenges, like globalisation. How do we as a region respond to it? They (Asean) are doing it but perhaps, not fast enough, not cohesive enough, we'll look into the finer details," said Zainal Abidin who is now chairman of the Malaysian Industrial Development Authority.

The Philippines' EPG representative, Dr Jesus Estanislao, a former finance secretary, too felt that Asean needed to establish stronger regional mechanisms to handle conflicts and crises and said it was the EPG's task to think of ways to restore Asean's credibility.

"The mechanisms and institutions we have are weak. Asean has lost a lot of its clout. Since the financial crisis, the credibility of Asean has gone down dramatically," said Estanislao, current chairman for financial markets development in the Pacific Economic Cooperation Council.

He said regaining Asean's credibility was important for Asia because Asean was the only grouping that can serve as a bridge to bring together Japan, the "natural leader for economics" and China, the "natural leader for politics" in Asia.

Singapore's delegate, Member of Parliament Prof Chin Tet Yung and National University of Singapore law dean, said one of the tasks of the EPG was to explore a greater role for Asean in global institutions such as the World Trade Organisation and International Monetary Fund.

"We also want to see Asean as an entity in world politics. What we would like to see is Asean being taken seriously as a bloc of nations in

world fora," he added.

Thai representative Mechai Viravaidya said a stronger Asean would yield from stronger economic bonds between member countries and warned against takeovers by Western or richer powers.

Advocating that Asean must protect its own economic interests, he proposed the setting up of an Asean holding company to allow member countries to participate in each other's privatised services like in telephone, railways and electricity companies.

"If we allow every Asean member to have a stake in each other's privatised services, then it will continue to bring us closer together. Otherwise, all of it would be owned by richer countries from the West or richer countries just in the Asian region alone," he said.

But does Asean need to review its long-standing consensus and principle of non-interference in the domestic affairs of its member countries?

"I wouldn't worry too much because Asean, in the past, for more than 30 years, has been acting very successfully on the basis of consensus and the basis of non-interference.

"I think we'll continue that because when there is a need for us to act in concert, we do act," said Zainal Abidin, describing the non-interference principle as sacrosanct for Asean.

But, the principle may be refined in terms of circumstances and issues involved, "otherwise people might say we are not responding to our own responsibilities," he added.

Estanislao, however, said Asean cannot continue to sweep a lot of problems under the rug in the name of consensus. "We have to face up to issues much more frontally and we will have to look for ways by which we can do that."

Speaking during the week, Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew said the growing outspokenness of some Asean leaders, especially the younger generation, suggested that Western thinking was slowly exerting its influence on Asean.

The local Straits Times said Lee made the point in an interview with Japanese publication Nihon Keizai Shimbun, when asked about Thai Foreign Minister Surin Pitsuwan who had criticised Asean's non-interference principle and Philippine President Joseph Estrada calling Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad "undemocratic".

Lee said Surin, among the younger generation of leaders, was a graduate of Harvard University in the United States while Estrada was influenced by the American media.

The 75-year-old Lee said the generational change in Asean was "unavoidable" but it would take 10 years to transform Asean.

The other members of the EPG are Indonesia's Centre for Strategic and International Studies senior research associate Cornelis Luhulima, Brunei's foreign permanent secretary Lim Jock Seng, Cambodia's Royal Academy president Sorn Samnang, Vietnam's former permanent representative to the United Nations Trinh Xuan Lang, Myanmar former ambassador to Japan and Canada U Ba Thwin and and Laotian Foreign Vice-Minister Phongsavath Boupha.

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