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Australia-Asia
EX-DIPLOMAT WARNS AUSSIES OF "ASIA FATIGUE"

By: Neville D'Cruz

MELBOURNE, May 9 (Bernama) -- Australians must avoid "Asia fatigue" because of recent political turmoil and the economic downturn in East Asia, a former Secretary of the Australian Foreign Affairs and Trade, Richard Woolcott, said at the weekend.

"To many Australians, some of our northern neighbours, especially Indonesia, now seem storm tossed on a sea of distasteful troubles," he wrote in the "Australian Financial Review"

"Violent independence movements in several other countries such as the Philippines, Sri Lanka and Papua New Guinea continue and raise the spectre of the possible fragmentation of the existing system of states in the region.

"As for Malaysia, a negative image of Dr Mahathir, as an autocrat who is about to be toppled because Anwar Ibrahim, his former deputy -- depicted as a liberal democratic national hero -- has been jailed by a corrupt judiciary on trumped up charges to serve Mahathir's political ends, has been widely promoted in Australia."

Woolcott went on to comment on the political situation in the Philippines, Japan, Myanmar, North Korea, India, China and Pakistan, all having a negative image in Australia.

"Instead of observing a generally stable and prosperous region, today Australians see a range of ugly and distasteful events and problems from India to Papua New Guinea," he said.

"Indeed, a new form of political correctness has arisen. It is now almost fashionable to dismiss Asian values, to forget the progress East Asian countries made over the three decades until 1997 and to indulge in strident criticism of events in neighbouring countries, especially Indonesia and Malaysia."

Woolcott, a former ambassador to Jakarta, said Australia's first policy priority must be Indonesia's economic recovery and political stability. This must also be the focus of regional countries other than Australia.

"The Philippines, Thailand, South Korea, Malaysia and Indonesia will recover economically and resume growth. Indonesia will not fragment, even if civil strife continues.

"When Indonesia recovers, Asean will regain its influence in regional affairs.

"At this time, Australia should be strengthening, not weakening, the national consensus that our main strategic, economic and political interests still lie -- and will continue to lie -- with the countries of East Asia and the Pacific," he said.

Woolcott said the present situation in the region actually offered Australia an opportunity.

"With our western background, our international outlook, our East Asian location and a strong economy, we should engage more -- not less -- fully with the region. We cannot build a fence around Australia.

"The choice is ours. The (Howard) Government should give the lead. We must show we are not fair weather friends whatever problems our neighbours face.

"It would be tragic if, through a nasty mix of disenchantment, belligerence, shortsightedness and, in some cases, latent racism and isolationism in the wider community, we were to turn our backs on this opportunity.

"We must continue to maintain a sympathetic and constructive involvement in our region," he said.

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