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25 world leaders to attend Asem summit from Oct 20

Sarban Singh in Seoul

WITH the exception of Vietnamese Prime Minister Phan Van Khai, all other leaders of the Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) member countries have confirmed attendance at the two-day biennial summit to be held here from Oct 20.

British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Italian Prime Minister Giuliano Amato were the last to confirm participation.

The Korea Times, quoting a Foreign Affairs and Trade Ministry official, said the British government had informed Seoul of the latest development on Saturday.

With Blair and Amato confirming attendance, the number of heads of state or government from Asian and European countries to attend Asem rose to 25.

The Hanoi Government recently said it would be represented by Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Manh Cam. The Prime Minister was unable to attend due to "urgent internal matters."

The newspaper said the decision by Blair and Amato to attend elated organisers of the event here, as this was the biggest diplomatic event to be held in this country.

The daily said the absence of the two would have "taken some of the steam out" of the Asem event, given Britain's and Italy's major role in Europe.

The participation by the two leaders in the biennial inter-continental forum had been uncertain until recently because of domestic affairs in their countries.

Blair's Labour Party had suffered low-level public approval ratings after a series of harsh protests against its policies on pensions and high fuel prices.

The newspaper said in an effort to get Blair to attend, Seoul dispatched former ambassador to Britain, Oh Jae-hee, to London to persuade him to join the forum which is aimed at promoting co-operation in the political, economic, social and cultural fields between the two regions.

The Italian Government announced Amato's participation in the Asem summit during a meeting between the foreign ministers of South Korea and Italy last week.

The announcement was released to the media on Saturday.

Originally, Amato was scheduled to attend a crucial meeting of coalition partners in Rome on Oct 21. The meeting was to pick the next Italian prime minister.

It was earlier reported that Amato might miss Asem because of his party's preparations for general elections scheduled for early next year.

The other 14 European leaders who will attend Asem include French President Jacques Chirac, Finnish President Tarja Kaarina Halonen, German Prime Minister Gerhard Schroeder and Spanish Prime Minister Jose Maria Aznar.

Heads of state and government from Asian countries who will attend are Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori, Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, Sultan of Brunei Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, Philippine President Joseph Estrada, Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong and Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai.

Fifteen countries from the European Union, the European Commission, Asean, Japan, China and South Korea make up Asem.

Meanwhile, another daily, the Korea Herald described Asem as an

"Olympics of simultaneous interpretation" as 16 languages would be used during the event.

The newspaper said 57 interpreters would be made available for leaders and officials of participating countries.

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