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Asean-Summit

ASEAN AND NORTHEAST ASIAN ECONOMIES DRAW CLOSER

SINGAPORE, Nov 24 (Bernama) -- Asean and its northeast neighbours, China, Japan and South Korea, moved to draw closer their countries and economies, announcing the possibility of turning their annual meetings to an East Asia summit and to form an East Asia free trade zone.

It came after leaders of the 10-nation Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) emerged from a dialogue with their counterparts, Chinese Premier Zhu Rongji, Japanese Premier Yoshiro Mori and South Korean President Kim Dae Jung.

It marked an eventful day for Asean which also formally endorsed a landmark e-Asean Framework Agreement to plug the region of 500 million population into the new economy era.

There was also backing from around the conference table for a trans-Asia railway stretching some 5,000km from Singapore to Kunming in China. The rail link is seen as a catalyst to open up the huge Mekong basin and boost the economies of the poorer Asean members, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam.

In another show of unity, the Asean leaders vowed to get Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar into the Asia-European Meeting (Asem) and Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec).

The three Asean countries have been sidelined by the two forums.

Asean comprises Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Speaking to newsmen after chairing the summit, Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said: "There is a strong desire on Northeast Asian countries to talk of an East Asian entity or economy or an organisation. This is also the desire of some Southeast Asian countries that we should now begin to think as East Asians."

The call for an East Asia Summit echoed strongly of the proposal by Malaysia in 1990 to start an East Asia Economic Caucus which was opposed especially by the United States.

Goh said Washington should not be concerned that it would be shut out of Asia because East Asia would take an "open regionalism" stand in forging cooperation among economies in the area.

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir, when asked for his views, said: "We are all for working closely together with our friends."

Since 1998, leaders of Asean, China, Japan and South Korea had met annually and the dialogue had been called the Asean Plus Three summit.

Goh also said the Asean leaders had decided to defer making India a summit partner to focus on strengthening and consolidating the Asean Plus Three process.

On efforts to gain admission for Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar into Apec and Asem, Dr Mahathir said it was unacceptable to Asean for some of its members to be spurned by organisations while accepting other Asean members

"At the moment, Asean appears to be broken up by the act of leaving out these three Asean countries during international meetings," he said.

China, South Korea and Japan also threw their support behind the trans-Asia railway project, key of which is to fill the gaps along the existing rail network.

The leaders agreed to step up the learning of the English language in their respective countries to steer through the e-Asean framework agreement which would also liberalise investments in info-communication industries

and spur electronic governments and mould Internet-savvy societies.  
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