

27/07/2000

Asean + 3 discuss concrete plans on E. Asian cooperation

Lokman Mansor in Bangkok

BANGKOK, Wed: The Asean + 3 foreign ministers meeting here for the first time today discussed concrete plans to further enhance East Asian cooperation, with Malaysia proposing regional cooperation in health.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said the two-hour meeting was "successful and very substantive" as a follow-up of the Asean + 3 Informal Summit in Manila last year.

The Asean + 3 forum comprises Asean members Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam, together with dialogue partners China, Japan and South Korea.

"There are certain projects and progress reports, and each country explained what they have done and their future plans to enhance East Asian cooperation in all fields," he told reporters.

Syed Hamid said the ministers agreed that the Asean + 3 foreign ministers will meet annually, and will task their officers to look at the future format of the meeting.

Asked if the future format would include a change of name, he said: "No, there will be no changed name. Asean + 3 is okay, as long as when we talk we talk about East Asian cooperation. We want to deepen it and it has been very successful."

The Asean + 3 is widely seen as the realisation of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's idea for an East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC), which he proposed would comprise Asean, China, Japan and South Korea.

Syed Hamid said the Asean + 3 forum is not merely rhetorical, as all the mechanisms for positive developments in the future have been put in place.

"Malaysia for example, has identified and will produce a concept paper on East Asian cooperation in health. We also have ongoing cooperation with Japan on training of economic officers from Myanmar," he added.

Syed Hamid said South Korean Foreign Minister Lee Joung-Binn briefed the meeting on the situation in the Korean Peninsula, particularly the recent summit between North and South Korea, which he said had produced concrete results.

Chinese Foreign Minister Tan Jiaxuan meanwhile, said China would like to see further cooperation in science and technology and agriculture, and will be preparing a concept paper on how to go about this.

"China also feels that East Asia should have a common position on many areas in the international fora concerning certain regional issues, such as the World Trade Organisation (WTO)," Syed Hamid said.

He said like Malaysia, China does not feel there should be a completely new round of talks until the commitments under the Uruguay Round have been met. It also feels that the issues of developing countries in world trade should also be addressed.

Asked if there are plans to include additional countries to the Asean + 3 forum, Syed Hamid said: "There are no plans to expand the Asean + 3, otherwise it will not be about East Asia. Malaysia is very happy because we have always been saying from the start that East Asian cooperation is vital in order to be influential and play a role in international as well as regional affairs. Now it has come to fruition, and this is good."

At a separate press conference earlier before the Asean + 3 meeting, Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer welcomed the launching of the East Asian grouping as "a good development", but suggested that it may be appropriate for Australia and New Zealand to participate in it as well.

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