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Asean-Summit  
ASEAN LEADERS BEGIN SUMMIT TOMORROW

SINGAPORE, Nov 23 (Bernama) -- In usual fashion, Asean leaders touched base over a working dinner before beginning their annual summit here tomorrow.

But the bigger and mixed platter would come over the next two days when they discuss how to strengthen the 10-nation Southeast Asian grouping after the bruising Asian economic crisis and political instability in some member countries.

The full turnout of leaders, despite some facing pressing domestic problems, augured well for Asean and underlined the existing solidarity that has come under siege over issues including Asean's sacrosanct principle of non-interference and bilateral spates between member countries, said a long-time senior official.

Host Premier Goh Chok Tong is joined by his counterparts, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia, Hun Sen of Cambodia, Sisavath Keobounpanth of Laos, Chuan Leekpai of Thailand, Phan Van Khai of Vietnam, Than Shwe of Myanmar, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei, President Joseph Estrada of the Philippines and President Abdurrahman Wahid of Indonesia.

Chinese Prime Minister Zhu Rongji, Japanese Prime Minister Yoshiro Mori and South Korean President Kim Dae Jung are also attending the summit for dialogue with the Asean leaders under the so-called Asean Plus Three meetings.

Malaysia's Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar said the biggest challenge facing the 33-year-old grouping was how to strengthen and make Asean relevant in the 21st century.

"It is important to make sure Asean works and nothing is done to undermine the strength and effectiveness of Asean as an organisation," he said.

The summit is expected to be heavy on economic issues going by repeated calls from various member countries for concrete integration for Asean to regain favour as an attractive investment location and to steady itself for expected competition when China joins the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

On the agenda is an e-Asean framework agreement which the leaders will sign tomorrow afternoon to facilitate e-commerce among their countries, a move hailed as an achievement for Asean to vault into the knowledge-based economy and globalisation.

The e-Asean pact is also viewed as a catalyst in economic integration for Asean which is seeking to narrow the gap between its more established members and its newer and poorer conference partners.

Asean comprises Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand before it expanded membership to Vietnam, Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia.

Two Eminent Persons Group reports will be presented to the leaders, the first on how to help Asean achieve its vision of a prosperous and stable Asean by year 2020 and the other on a new partnership with Japan.

The two reports highlight the need to strengthen cooperation for financial stability and in international financial organisations like the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

Thailand's Deputy Prime Minister and Commerce Minister Supachai Panitchpakdi, who will be the next WTO director-general, said he hoped to see the currency swap arrangement among Asean countries, China, Japan and South Korea eventually fleshed out into an Asian Monetary Fund.

"It has been improving day after day. I'm hopeful that at the end of the day we will have a full-fledged Asian Monetary Fund," said Supachai.

The AMF was mooted by Japan in 1997 but it was then opposed by the IMF fearing it would be undermined. But IMF's new managing director Horst Kohler seems to favour regional monetary cooperation.

Malaysia's International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz said China's WTO entry should not be seen as a setback for Asean because while it would result in competition, "there are more areas that we can complement".

A senior Chinese official, acknowledging concerns of Asean countries, said Beijing would propose a working group to facilitate trade and investment with Asean.

The working group will be under the Asean-China joint consultative committee, said Chinese Foreign Ministry's Asia Department head, Fu Ying.

Malaysia is keen to get the leaders to approve the route of the proposed trans-Asia railway running from Singapore to Kunming in China.

Syed Hamid said the railway would bring great benefit especially to the Mekong region countries to open and develop their economies.

Malaysia also want the leaders to discuss how to curb the scourge of HIV and Aids threatening the region.

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