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Asean's 'informal' but highly productive summit

Fadzil Ghazali in Singapore

SINGAPORE, Sun: A durian fest was held to make up for an oversight in not slotting lunch into the programme of the Asean economic and foreign ministers' informal meeting hosted by the island republic.

It was a minor glitch in the programmes preceding the 4th Asean Informal Summit that was immediately rectified when the King of Fruits was brought to the venue of the meeting.

With the dining room doors closed to prevent the fruit's smell from enveloping the five-star hotel, the ministers were served durians after their informal meetings.

Perhaps the word "informal" was taken too seriously when outlining the programmes. But it was in this relaxed atmosphere that the 4th Asean Informal Summit chalked up several achievements.

The summit saw the formalisation of an agreement on a protocol to allow flexibility on tariff cuts under the Asean Free Trade Area's Common Effective Preferential Tariff Scheme.

It also adopted an e-Asean framework agreement to promote information and communications technology development in the region, and endorsed a route for the US\$2.5 billion (US\$1 = RM3.80) trans-Asian railway project.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad described the just-concluded informal summit as "a very good meeting because for the first time member countries focused on things they can do".

His satisfaction with the four-day meeting is based on strong commitment from leaders of East Asian nations to make sure everything they have agreed upon will be followed through.

"It was a very good meeting ... for the first time we focused on things we can do and not on non-substantive matters," Dr Mahathir said.

Another positive outcome of the meeting was the acknowledgement of the 13 leaders from East Asian and Asean on the need for a grouping to make the region stronger.

This is in line with Dr Mahathir's idea in 1992 that an East Asian Economic Caucus comprising Asean countries, China, Japan and South Korea be established.

The EAEC concept is being revived by the East Asian countries because there is a need to balance development in the region with other parts of the world. This is reflected in the proposal to formalise Asean Plus Three into one entity.

"In the first place, we find that we are quite vulnerable. Even the big countries are vulnerable. The idea of an economic get-together, a caucus, group or community is to balance the developments in other parts of the world."

After the financial crisis, Dr Mahathir said, countries, especially those which were affected, began to realise that it was important to have a grouping.

"It is necessary that East Asian countries go into a huddle to discuss any new ideas, globalisation for example. Globalisation is touted to be very good for everybody, including the developing countries.

"But is that so? Let's go through it, let's do some modelling to see what happens when we embrace globalisation.

"This also applies to other fantastic ideas which will make us all very, very rich. But we have not seen ourselves getting rich, we have seen ourselves getting poorer," he added.

Dr Mahathir said the leaders proposed the "so-called grouping or caucus or community" because they realised that they were quite vulnerable, even the big countries.

Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said the meeting opted for the less-talk-more-action approach and that was why the gathering resulted in fruitful outcomes.

Asean countries and their North-East Asian counterparts announced at the meeting the possibility of forming an East Asia Summit and an East Asia Free Trade Zone to strengthen economic links.

A study group led by South Korea will brainstorm the two proposals and submit a report to the next summit in Brunei in a year's time.

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

The meeting also saw China, Japan and South Korea pledging to help get Asean back on its feet. They promised to back two major projects that would integrate the region economically - the e-Asean initiative and the trans-Asia railway linking Singapore to Kunming in China.

Japan said Asean countries can seek assistance from its US\$15 billion information technology package through the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum to speed up human resource training vital to a knowledge economy.

The summit saw three North-East Asian economies agreeing to work on an Asian IT belt which would eventually link up their capitals to form a "Silicon Valley" in Asia.

The Asean leaders stood firm that Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar be accorded the same recognition as the rest of the members in the grouping by others, saying that the three countries should not be left out of Apec or the Asia-Europe Meeting.

They were united and insisted that the planned ministerial meeting between Asean and the European Union (EU) in Laos next month must include Myanmar.

The meeting, the first since Myanmar joined Asean in 1997, is clouded by reports that the EU, still opposed to Myanmar on grounds of poor human rights record, may send only junior officers to the meeting.

Host Goh said: "If the EU wants to exclude Myanmar or else the dialogue will be called off, then let it be called off because we won't allow an external organisation to dictate who should be in Asean when we have such a dialogue."

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