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Consultation, consensus contribute to Asean understanding, solidarity

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THE just concluded 33rd Asean Ministerial Meeting/Post Ministerial Conference and the Asean Regional Forum have shown that consultation and consensus can contribute to many positive decisions and actions.

To the layman, diplomatic jargons such as "confidence-building measures" and "preventive diplomacy" mean nothing but to those in the business of negotiation, they mean finding solutions to issues raised.

The fact remains that discussions on issues and initiatives proposed would bring about the desired results which have a bearing on national, regional and international peace, stability and prosperity.

Thai English newspaper The Nation yesterday acknowledged that the meeting ended with an "incremental" development in regional security matters, including normalisation of ties with North Korea and its induction into the global community.

It must be noted that one of the major successes of the meet was the Asean Plus Three meeting involving the 10 members of the grouping - Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam - with China, Japan and South Korea.

The Asean Plus Three was the first official meeting at ministerial-level following the Joint Statement on East Asia Co-operation in Manila last year.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar had said the meeting complemented two earlier Economic Ministers and Finance Ministers Meetings involving the 13 countries.

"We are happy that the East Asia Co-operation proposed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in 1990 has finally come to fruition," he had said on the sidelines of the AMM/PMC/ARF meet.

China, Japan and South Korea had given their undertaking to contribute actively in the Asean Plus Three co-operation.

In this respect, Asean Plus Three would not only create a market of 1.2 billion people but it would also contribute to the peace efforts in the Korean Peninsula, especially with North Korea participating in the ARF for the first time at the meet.

The ARF is a security meeting involving Asean and their dialogue partners - the United States, European Union, Russia, China, Japan, Australia, Canada, South Korea, India, Papua New Guinea and Mongolia.

To the detractors, Asean Plus Three is an "exclusive club" detrimental to the interests of Western economies.

However, the Asean spirit of co-operation with its dialogue partners which included the US and the EU during the meeting showed that any concern shown over the "exclusive club" tag was unfounded.

Nevertheless, such concerns could always be resolved through consultation and consensus which are the hallmarks of Asean solidarity.

Even, the US had also expressed its willingness to assist in reform measures undertaken by Asean for sustainable growth following the positive economic recovery of the region since the 1997 downturn.

Australia had also pledged A\$200 million (RM446 million) to participate in the HIV/AIDS programme in Asean following Malaysia's initiative in highlighting the matter.

On nuclear disarmament, China had also shown its willingness to sign the treaty on Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon Free Zone. Likewise, Russia had also given its commitment to engage in the treaty.

All these show that in Asean "for every problem there's a solution" and usually it's done through consultation and consensus for the benefit of all peoples of the world.

Syed Hamid had said that globalisation and liberation had proven to be an uneven process, with unequal distribution of benefits and losses.

Generally, developing countries and groups within society felt that they were losing or were being marginalised.

"Malaysia believes that the views of developing countries, their rights to special and differential treatment, the importance of transparency in the process as well as the need in forging consensus must be taken into account in any multilateral negotiations. We would like to have an adequate representation of developing and emerging economies in international forums on the reforms that are being proposed as it is important to ensure a more meaningful global financial and monetary regime," Syed Hamid had said.

According to him, this would balance the current leanings towards free market principles against issues facing emerging markets, taking into cognisance the need to accommodate the different interests and circumstances of individual countries that were at different stages of development.

Therefore, efforts should be intensified to seek an amicable solution to the issue. Certainly, it can be done through consultation and consensus.

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