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Don't see Asean+3 as threat, Syed Hamid tells the West

Lokman Mansor in Bangkok

BANGKOK, Mon: The Asean+3 forum, which groups the 10 Asean member countries with Japan, China and South Korea, should not be regarded by the West as a potential economic bloc that will threaten free trade, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said.

He said the West should instead look at Asean+3 as an enlarged market of 1.2 billion people, and a region eager to participate in globalised trade and commerce.

"When they set up the North America Free Trade Area (Nafta) and the European Union, people did not take them as a bloc or a threat, so why should they feel this way with Asean+3? This is just our way of handling globalisation," Syed Hamid said.

He was speaking to reporters here today after the official opening of the 33rd Asean Ministerial Meeting (AMM) by Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai.

Asean, the Association of South-East Asian Nations, groups Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Myanmar, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Asean+3 has in the past been equated with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's idea for an East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC). An Asean+3 summit has been held annually since 1997, while economic and finance ministers-level Asean+3 meetings were held for the first time last May.

The foreign ministers meeting of Asean+3 will hold its inaugural meeting on Wednesday.

Syed Hamid said Asean has been talking about integration not only in the political and security fields, but also on the economic front. At the previous Asean Summit in Manila the idea of economic integration took on a wider context to include East Asia.

In his speech earlier, Syed Hamid said Malaysia is a staunch believer in the collective strength and potentials of Asean - that by standing together they can be influential.

"Malaysia remains confident that Asean has the capacity and resilience to emerge more united and stronger in the post-crisis period. For this to be achieved, Asean member states must return to the basics, namely to strengthen national resilience, to nurture positive and constructive bilateral relations while accelerating regional economic integration," he said.

On the AMM informal working dinner last night, he said the ministers discussed among others the recent Group of Eight (G-8) summit of developed nations in Japan.

Syed Hamid noted the G-8 has accepted Dr Mahathir's suggestion that the views of developing countries be taken into consideration by the G-8 in its decision-making process.

Representatives from Nigeria, South Africa, and Thailand (representing Asean) were invited to attend and present their views at the G-8 summit.

Syed Hamid said the G-8 leaders were told of the developing countries' concerns regarding the international financial architecture and debt relief. Italy, the host of the next G-8 summit, has agreed to invite the representatives again, he added.

In his speech, Syed Hamid highlighted the urgency for Asean action regarding HIV/AIDS, which not only represents a major public health and

social problem but a serious challenge to development.

The UN AIDS Organisation has reported that South-East Asia had 1.3 million new HIV infections in 1999 alone, and the region is experiencing the most drastic increase in HIV infections among the young.

He said HIV/AIDS will be on the agenda for the 4th Asean Informal Summit in Singapore later this year, and that an Asean Heads of Government Summit on HIV/AIDS will be held back-to-back with the 7th Asean Summit in Brunei next year.