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Dr Mahathir to attend Asem in Seoul

LANGKAWI, Tues. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will be attending the Third Asia-Europe Meeting beginning in Seoul on Friday.

His statement today ends speculation that he will not be attending the meeting which groups 13 Asian countries and 15 European Union member nations as well as the European Commission.

"It is only a rumour. I will be attending the meeting," Dr Mahathir said when pointed out that there was a rumour that he would not be attending the meeting.

Dr Mahathir was speaking at a joint Press conference with Indonesian president Abdurrahman Wahid. The latter is here for an overnight working visit enroute to Seoul to attend Asem.

Dr Mahathir had attended both the inaugural Asem meeting in Bangkok in 1996 and the second Asem meeting in London in 1998.

Meanwhile, Sarban Singh reports from Seoul that the highlight of this year's Asem will be discussions on the Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework (AECF).

A Malaysian senior official said issues concerning this were not discussed at the Bangkok Asem as it was the inaugural meeting where the forum was launched. The London meeting two years later discussed the Asian financial crisis.

"We have to bear in mind that Asem is still very young, thus, it has to be carefully nurtured.

"It has to be a partnership of equals. It is a forum where no one side can impose its views and position on others or to the contents, pace and direction of Asem," he said.

The official said preliminary discussions on the AECF were held in Ravanomi, Finland in October last year, in Lisbon (May) and Seoul (September).

"The groundwork has been laid. The AECF will specifically spell out areas of cooperation between the two regions in the next 10 years and the entire workings of the forum," he said.

It is understood that the AECF would also outline the criteria for membership following requests from some 20 countries, including Russia, Australia, New Zealand and India to join Asem.

However, the official said this issue was unlikely to be discussed at this year's meeting.

The official said the leaders would also discuss the Seoul Declaration for Peace in the Korean Peninsula during the summit.

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