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Asem-Issues

EAST MEETS WEST OVER HUMAN RIGHTS IN SEOUL

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KUALA LUMPUR, Oct 13 (Bernama) -- Dubbed the "Diplomatic Olympics", the third Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) in South Korea next week will see Asian and European leaders crossing swords, yet again, over human rights -- an issue regarded as "sensitive" by the east but "common" by the west.

The meeting opens in Seoul, host to the 1988 Olympics, on Oct 20 for two days of brainstorming expected to focus on ways to foster prosperity and stability between the two regions in the new millennium.

The gathering under the catchphrase "Partnership for Prosperity and Stability in the New Millennium" would bring together leaders of seven Asean states, China, South Korea and Japan as well as the 15 member states of the European Union (EU).

The seven of the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations are Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar are not part of the Asem process yet. Their membership is expected to be discussed in Seoul but the European side is expected to oppose Myanmar's inclusion because of its so-called human rights violations.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is scheduled to lead the Malaysian delegation which also includes Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz.

The 15 EU member states are Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Ireland, Italy, Luxemborg, the Netherlands, Portugal, Spain, Sweden and the United Kingdom. The President of the European Commission is also a member of Asem.

According to 1998 data, the economic size of the Asem region in GDP totalled US\$15.33 trillion with the EU accounting for US\$8.33 trillion and the 10 Asian countries about US\$7 trillion.

Their total trade volume was US\$6.3 trillion with the EU sharing about US\$4.18 trillion. Asia and Europe are occupied by 44.2 per cent of the world's population, account for 54.4 per cent of the GNP and 35.4 per cent of its trade.

Asem, an idea advanced by Singapore, is a forum for countries in Asia and Europe to promote economic, political and cultural cooperation. The leaders first met in Bangkok in March 1996 and the second Asem took place in London in April 1998.

Past meetings saw the Europeans championing what they called universal values such as democracy and human rights protection, Asian states were reluctant to discuss them.

While the Europeans consider democracy and human rights to be natural topics, some Asian nations feel that mentioning of such topics was blatant interference in their internal affairs.

Analysts believe that the two prickly issues would be brought up by the Europeans in Seoul and Asian states are likely to brush them off again.

Human rights activists interviewed by Bernama felt that the time has come for Asian nations to come face-to-face with the Europeans and to "deal with the matter".

"We should explain the real situation, the true picture, in our own countries. There is nothing to hide," said Prof Hamdan Adnan, a member of the Malaysian Human Rights Commission.

He said Malaysia and other Asian countries should clear the wrong preception held by westerners about the so-called state of human rights violations in these countries as potrayed by the Western media.

"Why should one be defensive," he added.

While the leaders are expected to trade accusations over human rights issue, outside the Asem convention centre, demonstrators will keep the South Korean police busy.

It was reported that an association comprising some 100 NGOs is planning to conduct large-scale demnostrations to express its opposition to the so-called economic neo-liberalism and the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The third Asem in Seoul is expected to touch on further reinforcement of economic cooperation and the achievement of greater understanding between the two regions.

Issues exxpected to be discussed include disarmament, global peacekeeping operations and the role of the United Nations in international diplomacy.

South Korean President Kim Dae-jung was likely to push for the ambitious trans-Eurasia Information Network project. Other projects include the closing of the digital divide and the promotion of global e-commerce.

The 26 leaders were expected to adopt the Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework (AECF) which would outline Asem's vision, its fundamental principles and objectives for the next century as well as concrete projects to be pursued.

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