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Enhancing multilateral ties

Kamarulzaman Salleh in Bangkok

THE 33rd Asean Ministerial Meeting/Post-Ministerial Conference beginning in Bangkok today marks another milestone in enhancing multilateral relations among members of the grouping and its dialogue partners.

Asean senior officials had over the last three-days laid the groundwork for the meet covering wide ranging matters from East Asia co-operation, Asean Troika, human rights mechanism to regional peace and security, in particular, the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone.

An interesting aspect of the AMM/PMC which would be followed by the Asean Regional Forum is the Asean Plus Three meeting involving China, Japan and South Korea.

It would complement two earlier Asean ministerial-level meetings - Trade Ministers and Finance Ministers held in Yangon and Chiang Mai respectively last May - which touched on East Asia co-operation initiated by Malaysia in 1990.

They had agreed on a wide range of co-operation including trade, investment and technology transfer, information technology and e-commerce, human resource development, East Asian Business Council, regional financing arrangements and co-ordination of positions in various international and regional fora.

"It is the beginning of better regional co-operation as had been proposed by Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad a decade ago," said a Malaysian diplomat, assuring detractors that it would not be a trade bloc as had always been emphasised by the Prime Minister.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, who is heading the 22-member delegation, will certainly reaffirm Malaysia's commitment towards ensuring the success of the co-operation.

Other members of the delegation include Foreign Ministry secretary-general Datuk Abdul Kadir Mohamad, director-general of Asean Datuk Hsu King Bee and Malaysian Ambassador to Thailand Datuk Seri Syed Ariff Fadzillah.

"There had been Asean plus Three meetings in the past but they were rather informal.

"This will be the first official meeting at ministerial-level following the Joint Statement on East Asia Co-operation in Manila last year.

"The Foreign Ministers will further explore the co-operation agreed upon by the heads of State in Manila," added a Malaysian delegate.

The Asean Troika will also be among the interesting topics of discussion during the AMM/PMC aimed at responding to issues and developments that threaten the stability and security of the region.

Thai Foreign Minister Dr Surin Pitsuwan had said some of the issues affecting the Asean region could no longer be regarded as exclusively internal anymore among member nations.

He said problems such as haze or smog, degradation of the environment, women and children trafficking as well as diseases had prompted the adoption of an Asean Troika.

"All these problems because of the nature in which they are being transformed cannot be regarded as domestic or exclusively internal as before," he said.

Other issues expected to be deliberated during the meeting include racial riots and tension in Indonesia which have been closely monitored by Asean and the international community.

Officials are hoping that the next one week will bring about the desired co-operation which would contribute towards a dynamic Asean following recovery after the 1997 economic crisis.

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