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Asean-Awareness

GREATER EFFORTS TO ENHANCE AWARENESS ON ASEAN ACTIVITIES

By: Ghazemy Mahmud

HANOI, Oct 13 (Bernama) -- Asean information ministers have agreed to intensify efforts in raising awareness on the regional grouping's activities and achievements in the international media.

This was to counter the recent negative image portrayed in the media about the 33-year-old organisation which has now expanded to 10 countries, the ministers said at the end of the conference of Asean Ministers Responsible for Information (AMRI) here today.

Asean secretary-general Rodolfo C. Severino said the image problems included misconceptions about Asean over issues such as the recent haze and efforts to integrate the region economically.

Member nations have made significant and accelerated progress in the integration process but press attention has been focused on the difficulties, he said.

He said public information for the economic competitiveness of the region was of vital importance.

The ministers also expressed their commitment to support each member nation's campaigns by signing a Memorandum of Understanding on National Communication Plans to Promote Asean Awareness and Understanding.

During the conference the ministers deliberated on the need for an immediate programme of action to address the current image problem.

Information Minister Tan Sri Khalil Yaakob, who signed the MOU on behalf of Malaysia, said Asean should strive to improve its "public relations" image fast to remain in the forefront in the wake of globalisation.

"This PR problem must be solved as soon as possible as things have to be put right professionally," he told Bernama here. Also present at the signing ceremony was Malaysian Ambassador Datuk Zainal Zain.

Asean has been put in a negative light through the years as an ineffectual and irrelevant organisation by the media despite its success as an economic and political powerhouse, Khalil said.

He said the image problem began with the end of the Cold War but the situation worsened after the financial crisis of three years ago which ravaged the economies of the grouping.

He said individual nations could start to improve Asean's image through their bilateral ties with other non-Asean countries and at international meetings.

He said official visits by ministers and leaders should also be used to promote Asean as a stable and strong regional market which is trying to integrate its economies.

Khalil said Malaysia has in part implemented this, and that besides stressing on Malaysia during Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's visits overseas, the Prime Minister also spoke on behalf of Asean and the developing world especially in the context of South-South cooperation.

In their own way, he said, the other countries can also do this.

He said there had been many agreements and arrangements in Asean, including bilateral ones between member nations relating to cooperation in culture, information and economy.

"We need to think about doing the actual follow-up to the various agreements," said Khalil who headed an 11-member delegation to the conference.

Some proposals such as the Asean satellite channel, initially mooted by Malaysia at earlier conferences, were thrashed out at the AMRI conference here. The ministers agreed that the channel would help promote Asean but later decided to defer the channel's establishment due to financial concerns of some member countries.

Admittedly, Khalil said, there were certain technical and financial problems of trying to improve Asean's image internationally by the member countries which are in varying stages of economic development, especially so after recovering from the recent financial crisis.

Khalil said the technical costs of some major projects need to be shared but proposed that "collectively the richer nations within Asean can contribute on behalf of everybody in other smaller projects."

Some of the projects, he said, did not really relate to technical matters such as funding as they could be implemented using existing facilities within member nations.

The sixth AMRI conference was opened yesterday by Deputy Prime Minister Nguyen Manh Cam who said that Asean needed to join efforts to seek effective solutions for the concerted management of information with respect to national sovereignty and regional cohesion.

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GM YBY