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ASEM-SUMMIT
IS ASEM AT A CROSSROAD? THE ANSWER WILL BE IN SEOUL

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SEOUL, Oct 19 (Bernama) -- East Asian and European leaders and their high-level representatives will gather here tomorrow for their third Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) to review the achievements and challenges of the five-year-old inter-regional body.

The European Commission felt that "there is little doubt that the Asem process has been a considerable success.

"Between summits, the Asem political dialogue has developed gradually but substantially, while in the economic field, it has been possible to work towards producing a greater consensus on the merits of multilateral liberalisation," the EU's directorate general for external relations said in a document released to the media recently.

The first Asem was held in Bangkok in 1996 while the second in 1998. The fourth summit will be held in Copenhagen, Denmark in 2002.

The Asem process brings heads of state and government of ten Asian countries and of the 15 member states of the EU together with the President of the European Commission, in total 26 partners.

What was supposed to be an informal, multidimensional forum, Asem might soon have its own Secretariat, according to the office of the third Asem here.

Although the Secretariat is among the 22 recommendations under the Asia-Europe Vision Group Report, its formation is still uncertain as members prefer Asem to continue being an informal, loose consultative organisation whose decision is not binding.

Beyond that the European nations are trying their best not to turn Asem into a development aid financial facility through the setting up of the Asem Trust Fund, one of the Asem initiatives in progress.

While the EU wanted the fund to provide technical expertise, Thailand, Indonesia and the Philippines preferred it to be extended.

As for Malaysia, it does not want to be included in the fund's list.

"We are not against it. We only want to be taken out of the list," said a Malaysian diplomat.

Fund aside, the Seoul Asem is also expected to deliberate on a proposal to allow countries which cannot fit into Asia and Europe to become members subject to consensus from the member states.

Some 20 countries including Russia, Australia and New Zealand reportedly hope to join the Asem.

However, observers said Asem must first resolve the membership of Myanmar, in particular and Cambodia and Laos, the three Asean member nations not yet part of the Asem process.

The European members have opposed or expressed reservation over Myanmar's inclusion because of Yangon's so-called human rights violations.

Analysts said that while political dimension cannot be neglected, differing viewpoints have caused suspicions on the Asian side.

"They feel that the EU will lecture them," said one analyst.

But the EU begged to differ. "We are looking for good political dialogue," said one EU diplomat.

But South Korea, host of the third Asem, is not about to allow any head-on collision between Asia and Europe.

To encourage consultations on a friendly atmosphere, Seoul has proposed or co-proposed with other Asem partners four new initiatives namely a Trans-Eurasia Information Network, Asem Fellowship Programme, an Initiative

to Address the Digital Divide and an Asem Roundtable on Globalisation, an issue that is very sensitive to many developing nations, including Malaysia.

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who will attend the summit here tomorrow is expected to give his views on globalisation by calling on the mostly developed European member states to accord developing nations a say in important global economic decision-making.

The Seoul Asem is also expected to endorse three documents -- the Chairman's Statement, the Asia-Europe Cooperation Framework 2000 and the Seoul Declaration for Peace on the Korean Peninsula, a subject close to the heart of the host country.

The leaders are also expected to confirm their intention to meet again for the fourth Asem in Copenhagen, Denmark in 2002 and decide to hold the fifth Asem in Asia in 2004.

They would also note that foreign, economic and finance ministers of Asem would meet in China, Belgium and Japan respectively in 2001 before the fourth Asem. -- BERNAMA

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