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Korean activists told to avoid demos

Sarban Singh in Seoul, South Korea

WITH slightly more than a week before the Third Asia-Europe Meeting gets under way, the South Korean government yesterday told activists and non-governmental organisations planning to stage demonstrations during the event to refrain from doing so.

South Korean Foreign Affairs and Trade Minister Lee Joung-binn said the government should be allowed to host the event, the biggest in South Korean history, successfully.

"We ask (civic groups) to abstain from holding outdoor rallies for the successful hosting of the coming third Asem in Seoul," he said.

Lee, however, said the government was willing to listen to proposals from the non-governmental organisations, especially on issues which it had failed to address, during the summit provided these were constructive.

Tens of thousands of activists are planning to hold a mammoth rally on Oct 20 around the Asem venue in southern Seoul to protest against the adverse effects of globalisation.

Last week, South Korean activists said they would stage a big anti-globalisation protest during the summit.

The Korea Confederation of Trade Unions (KCTU), a labour group that claims a membership of 600,000, said it would join hands with some 130 local non-governmental organisations for a massive anti-Asem demonstration.

KCTU officials have been quoted in local newspapers as saying that at least 20,000 people would participate in the demonstration against "ASEM-promoted neo-liberalism, which threatens the people's right to survival".

The South Korean activists expect the Asem meeting to strengthen globalisation, which they claim would widen the gap between rich and poor nations.

There has been a growing tide against economic globalisation around the world and international forums have been major targets of violent protests.

Violent demonstrations to oppose globalisation marred the World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle late last year and the recent Prague meeting of the International Monetary Fund.

Meanwhile, the National Police Agency yesterday said about 30,000 police officers would be deployed during the two-day Asem meeting to "ensure the international meeting was held successfully and peacefully."

The two-day Asem summit is scheduled to open in Seoul on Oct 20, with the 10 Asian and 15 European heads of state or government and the president of the European Commission to discuss inter-continental cooperation in the 21st century.

The biennial meeting will focus on cooperation between the two continents on political, economic, social and cultural issues.

During the recent meeting of senior officials from the Asem member states here, they agreed to adopt three documents at the summit - the Asia-Europe Co-operation Framework 2000, the Seoul Declaration on Peace on the Korean Peninsula and the chairman's statement.

Next week's meeting is the third following the 1998 London and 1996 Bangkok summit.

Meanwhile, the Yonhap news agency reported that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is likely to hold a one-to-one meeting with

President Kim Dae-jung at the summit's sidelines.

The agency, quoting officials from the Asem office, said most of the 25 state heads had requested for one-to-one-meetings with Kim but it would be difficult for the South Korean leader to meet all of them separately within two-days.

The official was quoted as saying that the top agenda in the bilateral summits between Kim and other leaders would be the ongoing inter-Korean talks for mutual reconciliation and cooperation and the economic recovery of the nation which has been suffering hardships since late 1997.

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