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Asean-Internet

LANDMARK E-ASEAN FRAMEWORK AGREEMENT SIGNED

SINGAPORE, Nov 24 (Bernama) -- Leaders of Asean's 10 member countries today signed a landmark e-Asean framework agreement to kickstart the electronic commerce and info-communications technology (ICT) sector.

The framework agreement, to lead to the establishment of an Asean information infrastructure, tariff cuts in ICT industries and to narrow the digital divide among the 10 member countries, is the centrepiece of the two-day fourth Asean informal summit which began here today.

Putting their signatures, both digitally and on paper, were Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei, Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid, Philippine President Joseph Estrada and prime ministers Hun Sen (Cambodia), Sisavath Keobounpanth (Laos), Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad (Malaysia), Than Shwe (Myanmar), Goh Chok Tong (Singapore), Chuan Leekpai (Thailand) and Phan Van Kai (Vietnam).

The heads of government each used a smart card and a notebook computer to sign the pact digitally.

The e-Asean task force is headed by Roberto Romulo of the Philippines.

Goh said the more advanced Asean members would help Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam to develop the human resource capacity in information technology (IT).

"The leaders discussed the need for all in Asean to master English because unless they are able to, they will not be able to use IT and take advantage of the new economy," he said.

Closing the digital divide will be a major task for Asean. The estimated number of Internet users in five Asean countries -- Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore -- only stands at 3.74 million or one per cent of their combined population.

Initiatives drawn up called for more exchanges between member countries to build electronic-savvy societies through education.

Among others, they require every member country to open immediately its ICT sector to investments by Asean investors and to extend national treatment to such investments.

Member states would cut duties and non-tariff barriers on intra-Asean trade in Asean ICT products in three moves - on January 1, 2003, 2004 and 2005.

The deadline is deferred for Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam to January 1, 2008, 2009 and 2010.

Romulo said an e-Asean business forum would be held here in February to acquaint the business community with the initiatives.

-- BERNAMA

ARA MAD TCL THG