

28/07/2000

Reaching a consensus - the Asean way

Lokman Mansor in Bangkok

BANGKOK, Thurs: The 33rd Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) Ministerial Meeting/Post Ministerial Conferences (AMM/PMC) and related meetings will end this Sunday, and in all likelihood will be declared a major success by the host, Thailand.

No doubt, the reception and friendliness given to guests of the kingdom throughout the 10-day meeting has been worthy of the "Land of Smiles".

The first to smile, of course, will be Thailand itself. Building on its theme for the AMM "Towards a Comprehensive Development Agenda", the host managed to achieve much of what it proposed.

Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai's suggestion for an Asean Trade Fair was accepted by the AMM, with Thailand to host the first. The Asean Troika, another proposal by Chuan from the previous Asean Summit, was also approved.

The ministers also signed the Joint Declaration for a Socially Cohesive and Caring Asean, which "embodies Asean's resolve to cooperate in ensuring that the people of Asean of all ages and groups have access to opportunities to create for themselves a decent and productive life".

Asean as a grouping also had something to smile about, with the inaugural meeting of the Asean plus China, Japan and South Korea (Asean + 3) foreign ministers.

Asean groups Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam.

The meeting consolidated East Asian cooperation further with discussions on concrete projects and plans. More details should emerge when they meet at the relevant ministerial and officers level.

There have already been Asean + 3 informal summits since 1997, and meetings of the economic and finance ministers level in May, prompting some observers to comment that the Asean + 3 forum is developing into Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's original idea for an East Asian Economic Caucus (EAEC).

It is also significant that the Asean + 3 forum has now been welcomed by the 7th Asean Regional Forum (ARF), including previous EAEC critics the US, EU and Australia.

The ARF was also a success for the inclusion of North Korea for the first time. While previously the Korean Peninsula featured prominently in the ARF's discussions on regional security matters, now they had the opportunity to meet and talk face-to-face with Foreign Minister Paek Namsun.

Pakistan, eager to participate in the ARF as well, was disappointed when it was announced that the forum ministers decided that with the current 23 participants, the focus should be on consolidating the process of dialogue and cooperation.

In addition to Pakistan, about 20 countries are also on the waiting list to become ARF members, a clear testimony to the forum's importance in confidence-building measures within the region.

For three days beginning tomorrow, Asean will meet its 10 dialogue partners during the PMC. It starts with the Asean + 10 meeting followed by Asean + 1 meetings with individual dialogue partners.

At least one PMC session, the Asean + 1 with Japan, is expected to deliver further good news to Asean. Japan is going to announce an allocation of funds for the development of human resources in Indochinese

countries, as part of Asean's Mekong Subregion Development Programme.

If the success of the Asean + 3 is anything to go by, then the outcome of the Asean + 1 meeting with China and South Korea should also be closely watched.

With smiles all around, it is no wonder that journalists are eager to see something concrete come out of the meetings, some agreements signed, something on paper.

But smiling is also part of Asian culture, and when one is a guest it is polite to smile even amid difficulty out of respect for the host. It would be naive to believe that everyone was in agreement over everything.

Frank and open discussions behind closed doors, where concerns and differences are raised and considered, and opinions given sincerely, are the stuff that enhance understanding and cooperation within the region.

It will be a real shame if, out of courtesy or other reasons, true feelings and views are not aired in such gatherings. That would not be the Asean way.

(END)