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Time for action on trans-Asian rail project: Syed Hamid

Fadzil Ghazali in Singapore

SINGAPORE, Wed: Malaysia is banking on the Fourth Asean Informal Summit to jump-start the implementation of the proposed multi-billion-ringgit trans-Asian railway project linking Singapore with Kunming in China.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Syed Albar said the country is hoping that the summit, which is scheduled to start on Friday, will put the project in high gear so that work can begin.

"Let us get the routes (for the project) confirmed first. Once we have the routes established then we can approach interested parties to develop the project," he told Malaysian journalists here today.

Syed Hamid said there are parties, including China and Japan, that want to be involved in the project, which he described as "a good catalyst" for economic development in the region.

He said the project has gone through "too many discussions and it is time to act on it", noting that transport ministers of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) have approved its feasibility study.

It is understood that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who will arrive here tomorrow, will push for discussions on the project during the summit on Friday.

Syed Hamid expressed confidence that a positive decision on the trans-Asian railway project in an Asean summit gathering will expedite further discussions and, ultimately, its implementation.

"So far, the mood has been positive (towards the project). We discussed it in Manila. There have been a lot of discussions. It will be decided here," he added.

Syed Hamid said the meeting of Asean leaders will also cover economic, political and social issues that are important to strengthen the group.

"Malaysia is placing a lot of importance on Asean to ensure that the group's activities and work do not weaken its role," he added.

Asked whether disunity has emerged in Asean following the International Labour Organisation's (ILO) sanctions against Myanmar, Syed Hamid said a mere difference in opinion does not mean that Asean is not united.

According to reports, the ILO has imposed sanctions on Myanmar, claiming the existence of forced labour in the country. Asean attempts to neutralise the sanctions fell through after Thailand's decision to agree with the ILO's move.

Syed Hamid said individual countries have the right to go ahead with their own decision even though Malaysia prefers a common stand by Asean on international matters.

Bernamea reports: The Asean-European Union ministerial meeting scheduled to be held in Laos next month will go ahead as planned, Laotian Foreign Ministry permanent secretary Bounkeut Sangsomsak said yesterday.

"Progress has been made. The meeting will be Asean and EU, bloc en bloc," he said in response to concerns that the meeting will be aborted again due to the European Union's stand against Myanmar.

Speaking to reporters on the sidelines of the Asean senior officials meeting ahead of the fourth Asean Informal Summit in Singapore, Sangsomsak said only four of the 15 EU members have yet to confirm their attendance for the December 11-12 meeting to be held at Vientiane.

The four are Denmark, Ireland, Portugal and the Netherlands.

"I think we will get an answer in a matter of time," he said, adding that European Commission officials will also attend the meeting.

Ties between the EU and Asean were strained after the South-East Asian grouping admitted Myanmar as a member in 1997. EU has been a harsh critic of Myanmar's human rights record.

The Vientiane talks will focus on politics, security, economic cooperation, and issues related to social, general trade and the World Trade Organisation, said Sangsomsak.