

# Asean to urge UN to meet on terrorism

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BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN: Asean leaders meeting here from tomorrow are expected to call on the United Nations to play a leading role in holding an international conference to combat international terrorism.

The call is expected to be included in an Asean declaration on combating international terrorism to be issued at the end of their summit in this oil-rich sultanate.

Some member countries are of the view that there is a need for such a conference to discuss terrorism in a comprehensive manner including the root causes of such acts.

The Asean leaders decided to issue a separate statement on the matter in the wake of developments following the Sept 11 attacks in New York and Washington.

Member countries felt it was not too late to issue the statement although it would be several weeks since the attacks.

"It was logistically impossible to call the meeting immediately after the attack. We had to consider the problem the host country would face had the meeting been brought forward," said a diplomat.

But questions remain on whether the leaders will call for a halt to the US-led strikes in Afghanistan.

Individually, countries like Malaysia and Indonesia have called for a stop to the bombing which has caused the death of innocent civilians and brought misery to millions of Afghan war refugees.

While there may be discussions on the military strikes, it is unlikely that the matter will be included in the declaration.

The question is: Does Asean have a common position on the issue of terrorism given the diversity of its member countries in terms of political systems and outlook!

It will be difficult for Asean to come up with a common position but at the same time, given the present environment, Asean should seize the opportunity to make a stand, given the fact that some of its members have internal problems.

The reason Asean needs to address the issue is the increasing influence of extremism which can affect the region.

The region is taking steps to address the issue with a meeting of Asean Home Ministers in Kuala Lumpur in April on transnational crime to focus on terrorism.

But terrorism will not be the sole topic of discussion.

The current global economic situation will be in the agenda as well during the two-day summit.

The focus will also be on providing more assistance by the more developed member countries to poorer members like Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

But in bridging the economic gap, the poorer countries need to do their part vis-a-vis the need to make their countries more attractive as competition will become stiffer with China's membership in the World Trade Organisation.

The Asean leaders who will have a meeting with the leaders of Japan, South Korea and China (Asean+3) to focus on strengthening relations with the three countries.

Asean realises that the three countries will be able to help in trade and investment.

The leaders had agreed during their summit in Singapore last year to hold a special session on HIV/AIDS here but, due to time constraints, only 15 minutes has been allocated to discuss the matter after which host Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah will issue a statement.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is expected to arrive today.