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ASEAN-SUMMIT

ASEAN LEADERS MEET ON FINAL DAY OF SUMMIT

By: Siti Hawa Othman

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN, Nov 6 (Bernama) -- Asean leaders today met on the second and final day of the Seventh Asean Summit here and held the Asean+3 meetings with China, Japan and Korea respectively this morning.

After a fruitful session yesterday, they are currently in deep discussion with their dialogue partners.

After conducting their respective bilateral meetings, most leaders are scheduled to leave for home later today.

However, leaders from China, Vietnam and Cambodia will only be departing tomorrow.

Yesterday's discussions concentrated on economic development and Asean integration besides addressing the immediate concerns of combating terrorism.

Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah of Brunei, in reading out the chairman's statement yesterday, said Asean leaders had reaffirmed and endorsed various efforts and proposals forwarded to them.

Besides endorsing the mid-term review of the Hanoi Plan of Action, the leaders also welcomed the proposal to commission an Asean Competitiveness Study to offer an opportunity for Asean countries to work closer together to strengthen their competitiveness and in turn accelerate regional integration.

As for far-reaching economic co-operation, the leaders had also reaffirmed the Singapore-Kunming link as a priority project and endorsed the routes agreed to by ministers attending the summit.

The leaders also reaffirmed the importance of sub-regional growth areas and encouraged greater private sector involvement in those areas.

To narrow the development gap, the leaders agreed to implement the Asean Integration System of Preferences (AISP) in January next year whereby newer members will gain tariff-free access earlier than the targeted date of 2010.

As for the Asean-China Free Trade Area (FTA) concept, Asean secretary-general Rodolfo Severino told a press conference yesterday that the leaders found the idea worth pursuing.

However, he said recommendations by the Expert Group on this proposal needed to be looked into as it had a long-term perspective.

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad yesterday voiced his concern of a possible one-sided benefit under this arrangement as goods from China would be in direct competition with those produced by Asean manufacturers.

As such, he said there was a need to ensure that the influx of Chinese goods into Southeast Asia would not result in the latter's industries being affected.

China's premier Zhu Rongji, when asked by reporters yesterday about the concern that China was drawing foreign investment away from its neighbours, said that his job was to develop China's economy.

He said the Asean-China FTA concept would be an incentive for the region because a prosperous China would be able to buy more products from its neighbours and the Chinese people would be able to travel through Asia and spend their money there. -- BERNAMA

SHO SHY