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Asean ministers to map out strategies to mitigate impact of US slowdown

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THE Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) labour ministers will formulate strategies to mitigate the impact of the US economic slowdown on workers in the region when they meet in Kuala Lumpur next week.

This is one of the topics to be deliberated on at the 15th Asean Labour Ministers Meeting (ALMM), which starts on Tuesday.

Malaysia will raise several issues concerning the US slowdown and its impact on the Asean countries, the secretariat of the 15th ALMM said in a statement.

"This is our pro-active move... to think of a strategy and countervailing measures that could mitigate the impact (of the US slowdown)," the secretariat said in response to a Business Times' query.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is scheduled to officiate at the opening of the meeting, where about 50 delegates led by respective Asean labour ministers are expected to participate.

The ministerial meeting on May 10 and 11 will be preceded by the Asean Sub-Committee on Labour Affairs meeting on May 8 and Senior Labour Officials Meeting on May 9.

This year's meeting is significant because for the first time, there will be participation from three Asean diapatners - Japan, South Korea and China - in the ALMM.

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

With a combined population of over 510 million people and gross domestic product of US\$820 billion (US\$1 = RM3.80), Asean is the world's fourth largest market after the US, the European Union and Japan. Collectively, the region is the third largest overseas market for US exports.

During the meeting, Malaysia is expected to share with its Asean counterparts measures taken by the Government to alleviate the impact of the US slowdown.

The softening of the world's second biggest economy and the downward cycle of the global electronics market had caused thousands of workers, including Malaysians, to lose their jobs when companies all over the world downsize, relocate or cease operations.

Some 15,000 workers have been laid off in Malaysia by the multinationals and local companies between October 2000 and March this year. About 80 per cent of these workers were from the electronic and electrical sector.

Being under a full employment situation (below 4 per cent) with abundant job vacancies, Malaysia has taken steps to hold job fairs at various states to match retrenched workers, job-seekers and employers who are in need of workers.

The Human Resources Ministry has also set up a special task force to monitor retrenchments following the closure of companies affected by the US slowdown and devise an action plan to contain the situation.

The 15th ALMM, the third hosted by Kuala Lumpur, will also deliberate on issues of common interest in labour areas affecting the Asean region and initiate projects to enhance human resource capabilities and generate job opportunities.

It will also reach a common stand on issues to be discussed at the International Labour Organisation (ILO) Conference in Geneva next month such as the revision of supervisory mechanism in the ILO, the ILO biennium budget (2002-2003) and the new instrument to be adopted by the

International Labour Conference (ILC) on "Occupational Safety and Health in Agriculture".

The meeting will discuss follow-up actions on the decisions of the 14th ALMM in Manila last year, especially on the on-going projects on human resource and job creation.

The projects include Asean Occupational Safety and Health Network, Asean Regional Project on Informal Sector Development, Asean Regional Project on Human Resources Development Planning, Asean Programme on Industrial Relations and Asean Skills Competition.

The Asean +3 Ministerial Forum, meanwhile, will focus on efforts to identify areas of technical cooperation in operationalising Asean projects.

"This forum may possibly discuss the developments in Myanmar in response to the resolution adopted by the ILC in 2000, to address the issue of forced labour in the country," the statement said.

A joint communique is expected to be issued at the end of the four-day meeting.

Subsequently, the labour ministers have been invited to attend the Workers Day Rally on May 12, which will see the participation of some 10,000 people. It is an annual tripartite gathering in Malaysia, involving the Government, workers and employers, held in conjunction with the Workers Day.

The ALMM was inaugurated in Jakarta, Indonesia in 1975. It was initially held once in every two years, but has been changed to an annual event during the 12th ALMM in Hanoi, Vietnam.

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