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BFA-Asia

BFA TO HELP ASIA GET ITS ACT TOGETHER, SAYS MUSA HITAM

By: Yong Soo Heong

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 24 (Bernama) -- The Boao Forum for Asia (BFA) to be launched in Hainan, China, on Tuesday will seek solutions and implement programmes to prepare Asia for the onslaught of globalisation and ensure that economic prosperity is spread all over the region.

"It's about helping Asia to get its act together," Tan Sri Musa Hitam, a member of the BFA's advisory group, the Leaders' Council, said in an interview here.

"It's about maintaining Asia's dynamism and vibrancy," he said.

The BFA's emphasis would be mainly economic and there would be mechanisms to ensure that it would not be reduced to a "talk shop," he said.

In other words, it would be an institution whose priority was to deliver viable economic development programmes for the benefit of Asian nations, he added.

The council comprises elder statesmen, business leaders and top academicians.

Boao is a resort located in a special economic zone on Hainan island in southern China and the forum has taken its name after the resort.

Tracing the initiative towards its establishment, which began last year, Musa said the BFA was inspired by the annual World Economic Forum (WEF) in Davos, Switzerland, but he was quick to point out that it would not be a duplication of Davos.

He said that when he attended the Davos forum twice some years back when he was deputy prime minister, he felt that Asia was somewhat marginalised at the WEF.

Although he liked the WEF's format as it enabled one to interact with not only the world's top leaders but also corporate chiefs, he said it was only logical that an Asian-centric institution of some kind be set up, given the scant attention given to Asia at Davos at that time.

With the BFA, he said, there would be specific identification of the peculiarities of the different economic systems and situations in Asia, which essentially was a diverse group of countries.

Using an analogy, he said a few Asian countries were already in orbit, referring to some advanced countries like Japan. While some had just gotten off the launch pad, some were just at the launch pad and some had yet to build a launch pad.

"There has to be sensitivity to the special needs of the different Asian countries," he said.

Musa said the BFA would identify areas for collaboration, cooperation and assistance among Asian countries in view of their diverse backgrounds.

"We want to benefit from each other's experience for the overall good," he said.

To make things work better and to achieve the desired results, Musa said, a research institute would be set up under the auspices of the BFA to undertake studies for the benefit of the region.

Such a body would help it to be more effective as its orientation would be mainly economic, he said.

Musa also said that the exchange of experts, ideas and information at the BFA would enable countries to complement one another with their experiences.

On Malaysia's involvement in the BFA, he said the country was

well-represented. Besides him, Malaysia has two other persons in the BFA set up. For instance, Tan Sri Ajit Singh, the former secretary-general of Asean, is to be formally appointed BFA's secretary-general.

In addition, Datuk Dr Kamal Salih, former executive director of the Malaysian Institute of Economic Research (MIER) and currently chairman of Tenggara Capital Bhd, is Musa's representative at the BFA.

"These are good people who would surely do Malaysia proud in terms of our contributions to the forum's activities," Musa said.

Of special significance to Malaysia, he said, was that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad would deliver a keynote address at the launch of the BFA on Tuesday. Besides the Malaysian premier, several heads of state of Asian countries, including Chinese president Jiang Zemin, will also attend.

Musa said the presence of top leaders from several Asian countries would provide the BFA with the necessary political clout.

As for his involvement in the BFA, he said it was a privilege to serve in an advisory capacity and he accepted the invitation almost without hesitation from the Chinese government because "I thought BFA is a very good idea."

He said the Chinese government had been very enthusiastic over this pan Asian body and had provided a venue conducive for BFA to run its activities efficiently.

"Somebody has to start something, somebody has to make available the facilities and infrastructure and all things that go with such things," said Musa of China's keenness in getting the project off the ground.

Responding to detractors who had expressed sentiments that the BFA could become a "Chinese" institution, Musa said the Chinese government had declared that the BFA would cater for Asia in the widest sense of the word.

He said although the BFA was inspired by China, it was all right so long as everyone knew that its intention was good for the broader perspective of Asia.

He said the BFA should not be interpreted in any negative way and one had to start to accept its establishment in good faith.

"I am not interested in questions relating to what is the political agenda of a particular country. Frankly, every country must have its own political agenda. When one talks of political agenda, etc, this will be dealt with in the normal political process in international relations."

Musa said Malaysia's presence in the BFA would contribute towards a much more balanced approach.

"Notwithstanding any political agenda by any country, we will just make it work with the appropriate balance so that it (BFA) would not be `dominated' by any country, big or small, powerful or less powerful, economically or politically."

Musa said the Chinese government had indicated that it would raise the standard of facilities in Hainan in terms of conference halls, accommodation, infrastructure, communications and the conference to prepare for the BFA's formal meeting next year.

He believed that the BFA would get off to a reasonably good start and lay the groundwork for the first formal session next year.

"I am a person who does not like something to start with a bang and it finishes off with nothing. I feel it is off to a reasonably good start and we hope to attract as many heads of government to come in 2002," he said.

Musa said there would be plenty of ideas but whether they would come to fruition would depend on the people at the BFA.

To get the BFA humming along nicely, a company will be set up to run its activities. It will be a non-profit organisation while funding will come in the form of subscription and sponsorship although the Chinese

government will come out with the initial funding.

Membership will also be open to the private sector to ensure that corporate leaders and captains of industry participate actively in the BFA's programmes.

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