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Low-key turnout at retreat

Baidura Ahmad in Siem Reap, Cambodia

JUST a few hours before the start of the Asean Economic Ministers retreat in this home of the Angkor Wat, three Ministers have faxed in their regrets, leading some pessimists to already label this meet a non-event.

Malaysia will now be led by International Trade and Industry Ministry deputy secretary-general (trade) Mohd Sidek Hassan. Indonesia and the Philippines, the other two founding members of Asean, are sending deputy minister-level representatives due to the troubled situation on their homefront.

Still, those who made it here for the official opening by Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen today, expect to get down to business as usual in the next four days.

"As far as we are concerned, the agenda is still the same. We did not come here to sign anything major. For that, we have the annual informal summit or the AEM (Asean Economic Ministers) meeting itself which is held every three years.

"We are here to air any misgivings or problems, not that we are expecting any, before we meet for the AEM meeting in Hanoi in October," said an Asean Secretariat official.

The seventh AEM Retreat acts as a informal forum for member countries to freely talk on issues that need Asean's immediate attention.

The retreat is expected to exchange ideas on how to enhance Asean integration and bridge the gap within Asean, and provide technical assistance to newer members Myanmar, Laos and the youngest member, host Cambodia which joined in 1999.

The Economic Ministers will discuss ways to help these new members boost their economies. With the development disparity narrowed, Asean integration will be enhanced or, as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad likes to say: "Prosper thy neighbour and you will also prosper".

At the last informal summit in Singapore in November, the Asean leaders had agreed to launch an Initiative for Asean Integration (IAI). The IAI is to narrow the divide within Asean and enhance Asean's competitiveness as a region.

Essentially, it provides a framework for regional co-operation through which the more developed Asean members can help fellow members who most need it.

The IAI will focus on education, skills development and worker training, the key factors of competitiveness in the New Economy.

The Asean-plus-three - China, Japan and South Korea - had expressed support for the IAI and agreed to work towards an Asian IT Belt to link up cities of IT excellence in Asia. This will create an environment of opportunities that would engage the best talent in Asean to develop Asia.

The meeting will also review the implementation of the e-Asean Framework Agreement signed by Asean leaders in 1999 which provides a broad framework to develop a free trade area for goods, services and investments for the info-communications and telecommunications industries within Asean.

Already, the Asean private sector is exploring ways of promoting more efficient flow of Internet traffic including regional mirroring and hubbing and the setting up of national and regional Internet exchanges and Internet gateways.

The meeting will also discuss joint approaches to international economic issues. The Ministers are likely to exchange views on the latest

developments in Apec (Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation forum) and the World Trade Organisation.

Whatever it is, at least one party, the host, is already labelling this retreat a success. Cambodia's Undersecretary of State Narith Chhim said: "This is a very important meeting for us. In a way, it gives us an opportunity to show the world that we are ready for business."

And no better venue to play host than Siem Reap which is home to the country's number one attraction, Angkor Wat.