

21 AUG 2001

Megawati-Visit

MEGAWATI STARTS ASEAN VISIT AS KEY MINISTERS DEPARTS FOR ACHEH

By: Openg Onn

JAKARTA, Aug 21 (Bernama) -- President Megawati Sukarnoputri left for Manila today on the first leg of her eight-day visit to strengthen Indonesia's ties with the other nine fellow Asean member countries.

Megawati, who was elevated from the vice-presidency to become president of the world's fourth most populous nation on July 23, is accompanied by husband Taufik Kiemas, who is a Member of Parliament, daughter Maharani and elder brother and also MP, Guruh Sukarnoputra.

Also in her entourage are Foreign Minister Hassan Wirayuda, State/Cabinet Secretary Bambang Kesowo and two other MPs.

Vice-President Hamzah Haz and cabinet ministers were at the Halim Perdana-Kusuma Airport here to see her off.

The visit, originally scheduled to begin Wednesday, was brought forward a day to enable Megawati meet her Philippine counterpart Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, who is slated to go on an overseas trip tomorrow.

Kuala Lumpur will be the last stop on her itinerary which includes holding bilateral talks with Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

After Asean, Megawati will visit the United States on Sept 19 at the invitation of President George W. Bush and later Japan, on a date yet to be fixed.

Hassan told reporters yesterday that by visiting Asean first, Megawati showed Indonesia's commitment to the regional grouping which he said would remain the cornerstone of its foreign policy.

There were however mixed reactions to Megawati's overseas tour with political observers drawing similarities with her predecessor Abdurrahman Wahid, who was ousted by parliament for incompetence.

Abdurrahman made a notorious mark during his 21 months of erratic rule as "the most travelled president" having visited more than 50 nations while Indonesia was sinking deeper into economic and political tumult.

Unlike Abdurrahman, Megawati made sure that critical domestic problems remained her concern by sending 13 key ministers and high-ranking officials to the restive province of Aceh which is fighting a guerilla warfare for more than three decades to break away from the republic.

They are led by Coordinating Ministers for Political, Social and Security Affairs, Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono, who said yesterday that the delegation would seek immediate and short-term solutions to the complex problem in the strife-torn province.

His entourage flew to Banda Aceh, the provincial capital of the resource-rich Aceh today and from there it travelled to Lhokeseumawe, the stronghold of the armed separatist movement, under the banner of the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka (GAM).

Military offensives and psychological warfare by the Indonesia security forces failed to suppress the insurgency mounted by GAM which is estimated to have more than 10,000 paramilitary members.

Instead, the central and local governments meet with even further resistance from the movement whose heartland is one of the world's biggest suppliers of oil and gas.

-- BERNAMA

OPP RYN