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Rafidah-Trade

M'SIA WELCOMES ASEAN-CHINA FREE TRADE AREA CONCEPT

By: Siti Hawa Osman

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN, Nov 4 (Bernama) -- Malaysia welcomes the concept of an Asean-China Free Trade Area (FTA), International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz said today.

Speaking to reporters on her arrival for the Seventh Asean Summit starting tomorrow, she said Asean ministers would be recommended to accept a study to be done on Asean-China FTA.

Rafidah said that the study should look at the entire spectrum of China-Asean economic relationship.

"We will be looking at what are the stages we might have to look at before going to the Asean-China FTA concept completely," she said.

In strengthening economic cooperation, it was earlier reported that China has called for the establishment of an Expert Group under the Asean-China Joint Cooperation to study trade and economic cooperation between Asean and China by looking at the implications of China's accession to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the possibility of establishing free-trade relations between Asean and China.

The Expert Group met for the first time in Beijing in April and now recommendations of the study are to be presented during the Asean-China Summit here.

Meanwhile, besides the Asean-China FTA proposal, sources said other economic matters taking prominence during the Summit would also include the Asean Integrated System of Preference (AISP) as well as a competitive study of Asean.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, at a media conference for Malaysian journalists today, said the morning session of tomorrow's Summit will see leaders discussing economic issues such as the global slowdown, recession as well as initial steps to be taken to prevent the economies of Asean from being adversely affected by the current US slowdown.

He said the US economy was already slowing down prior to the Sept 11 attacks and had now worsened, affecting global trade and investment.

Also, on the cards tomorrow are efforts to accelerate Asean economic integration which will see discussion, among others, revolving on the Asean Free Trade Area (AFTA) and matters on investments, financial cooperation and energy cooperation.

Topics of discussion during the day will also be broaden to include the Asean Mekong Basin Development Cooperation whereby an October meeting has called for the participation of non-Asean members in the development of the Mekong Basin.

Syed Hamid said Japan and Korea had been invited as core members in this regard.

In the meantime, the Asean+3 meeting will be held in the afternoon session which will, among others, include discussion on the East Asian Vision Group (EAVG) report and recommendations.

The EAVG was initiated by Korea in Hanoi in 1998 to discuss long-term cooperation in the region.

Syed Hamid said after the end of the first-day Summit, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad would host a media conference to give a round-up of the day's meeting.

Prior to this, he will be having bilateral talks with the leaders of Korea and Cambodia.

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