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Asean-Focus

TERRORISM, ECONOMY, DISEASE -- ASEAN FOCAL POINTS TOMORROW

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BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN, Nov 4 (Bernama) -- Leaders of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean) will begin their seventh summit here tomorrow at which terrorism, bridging the economic gap and the fight against the spread of HIV/Aids in the region are expected to be focal points.

The highlight of the two-day summit will be the signing of the "Asean Declaration on Combating International Terrorism" which aims to lay the groundwork for joint cooperation and concerted effort to counter terrorism.

The declaration was crucial for Asean members as the economic downturn had been made worse by the terrorist attacks on the the United States, a major export market for Asean countries, observers here said.

Asean dialogue partners -- China, Japan and South Korea-- had expressed support for the declaration on terrorism but nevertheless were not expected to come up with a joint statement on the subject, said a senior Malaysian official.

The declaration would neither mention the US-led military air strikes on Afghanistan nor name Osama bin Laden as the prime suspect in the Sept 11 attacks, the observers said

Asked whether it was rather late for Asean to make a stand on terrorism, the Malaysian official said, "If we don't do it now and here, then people will question our stand against global terrorism."

To another question whether Asean will collectively call on the US to halt bombings on Afghanistan which began on Oct 7, another Asean senior official said it would be difficult to make a unanimous decision.

"Some Asean members are strongly aligned to the US and prefer to keep silent while for instance Malaysia and Indonesia have already voiced their opposition to military action," he said.

He said Asean members outrightly condemned terrorism and vowed to counter the problem before it further damaged the fragile world economy.

A special leaders' statement is also expected on HIV/Aids following a special session on the disease as mooted by Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the Fifth International Congress on Aids in Asia and the Pacific in Kuala Lumpur in 1999.

As 1.6 million people are reported to be infected with the disease in the Asean region, the objective of the special session is to reaffirm and support a four-year joint action plan to combat the spread of the disease.

Asean Secretary-General Rodolfo C. Severino Jr had said a regional approach, technical expertise exchange and cost-sharing on joint research projects would have added value and help member countries reduce the spread of the disease.

The Asean leaders will hold additional talks with leaders from China, Japan and South Korea to enhance economic ties.

The Asean leaders will together hold a separate "Asean+1" meeting with China, focusing on the proposed Asean-China free trade agreement.

The Asean meeting with South Korea will centre on the setting up of an information communication technology fund and in its meeting with Japan, will request for further cooperation with Asean.

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

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