

KL to propose setting up Asean bureau

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PUTRAJAYA: The Asean+3 Secretariat proposed by Malaysia has taken a new format - Kuala Lumpur is now proposing the setting up of a bureau that will be "organically linked" to the Asean Secretariat in Jakarta.

The move is seen as a way out for Kuala Lumpur, which has been pushing for the secretariat but the idea was rejected by the rest of the Asean members at the Asean Ministerial Meeting in Brunei in July.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is expected to bring up the new proposal and convince his Asean counterparts during their annual summit in Cambodia beginning Sunday.

Under the reformulated proposal, the Asean+3 bureau will come under the supervision of the Asean secretariat.

The bureau, a mechanism to promote cooperation with

the grouping's dialogue partners China, South Korea and Japan, is to be led by a deputy secretary-general.

It is learnt that the proposal was submitted at the Asean senior officials meeting in Phnom Penh several weeks ago and some members gave encouraging response although a few countries were still not convinced.

"This time around, there was support because members finally saw this as part of the initiative to strengthen the Asean secretariat," said an official.

"We have reformulated our concept. The bureau will be organically linked to Jakarta just like how some agencies are linked to the United Nations and the European Union," he added.

When it was first proposed, the secretariat idea was shot down because other Asean countries felt that the present secretariat in Jakarta will be marginalised and suggested instead that the

grouping's secretariat be strengthened.

Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong during a recent trip here had expressed reservations over the Asean+3 secretariat as he feared that this could overshadow Asean and weaken it.

However, the three dialogue partners have strongly supported the idea.

As with the secretariat, Malaysia wants the Asean+3 bureau to be sited in Kuala Lumpur and would provide seed money of US\$10mil (RM38mil) as operational costs for the first five years.

The official said: "Our argument is that with the increasing cooperation with the three dialogue partners, we should move forward as there are many more areas of cooperation to be coordinated and covered.

"The question of marginalisation should not be an issue anymore. The bureau will be Asean-driven."