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Asean-Renaissance

ASEAN EMBARKS ON THE ROAD TOWARDS REGIONAL RENAISSANCE

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PHNOM PENH, Nov 6 (Bernama) -- The just-concluded 8th Asean Summit marks a new chapter for the grouping as its 10 members find strength in each other to embark on an economic renaissance while pledging to counter terrorist activities in the region.

After being in the doldrums following the Asian financial crisis in 1997, Asean has proven its resilience as it once again emerges as a region with solid potentials wooed by many.

Being written-off is not part of Asean's plans as leaders meet summit after summit to forge closer economic cooperation and integration that would make Southeast Asia an attractive market.

Asean's toil seems to be paying off as economic powerhouses such as China and Japan, the world's second largest economy, signed pacts with the grouping in Phnom Penh that may lead to the possible formation of Asean-China and Asean-Japan Free Trade Areas (FTAs).

The FTA with China by the year 2010 will be the largest economic bloc in the world with about 1.7 billion consumers.

In remarks made after the summit, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Asean was now on the uptrend and its economic relations with its three dialogue partners China, Japan and South Korea would make the collective partnership one of the most important for the global economy.

"I think from now on Asean will play a more important role in the world economy," he said.

Dr Mahathir said several other parties from Africa and North America to Europe and India had expressed intentions to have some sort of economic partnerships with Asean.

Asean formed in 1967 comprises Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Phillipines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Asean leaders also addressed terrorism fear that is bugging the region in the wake of last month's bomb blast on the Indonesian resort island of Bali, suspected to be the work of terrorists.

They were obviously concerned over the negative portrayal of Southeast Asia as not a safe place to be following the Oct 12 incident in which nearly 200 people lost their lives.

Seeking to reassure frayed nerves, they issued a declaration condemning the attacks there and also in the Philippines, and resolved to intensify efforts to suppress terrorist activities in the region.

In a show of solidarity with Indonesia, it was announced that next year's summit would be held in Bali.

Aware of the impact on the region's multi-billion dollar tourism industry and business environment, Asean leaders flayed foreign governments for issuing travel warnings advising their citizens to avoid Southeast Asia without substantial proof of possible terrorist attacks.

In one of his interventions at the high-level gathering, Dr Mahathir reiterated that terrorism could not be resolved by military means alone without understanding and addressing the root causes of the menace.

Another major achievement of the Phnom Penh Summit was China's participation in the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea designed to ease tensions related to overlapping claims on the Spratly islands.

Observers said although it was not a legally-binding document, it was a much-needed confidence building booster for regional security with regard

to the dispute over the potentially oil and mineral rich atolls located in one of the world's busiest shipping lanes.

As the dust slowly settles after the end of the summit, life in the Cambodian capital regained its normal rhythm with schools and businesses in general reopened after a long break as police removed temporary security posts and cordons near the venue of the summit, the Inter-Continental hotel.

Hosting its first ever Asean summit has been quite a learning experience for Cambodia, the youngest member of Asean, which joined the grouping in 1999, with the attendant security nightmare and communication breakdown resulting in flared temper.

Nevertheless, it has been a triumph of Khmer diplomacy especially the convening of the inaugural Asean-India Summit in Phnom Penh which was first mooted by Cambodia.

-- BERNAMA

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