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ASEM-Opening

ASIA-EUROPE NEEDS BETTER FRAMEWORK TO BOOST TRADE LINKAGES

By: Mikhail Raj Abdullah

COPENHAGEN, Sept 23 (Bernama) -- Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen opened the fourth Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM 4) here today by calling on Asian and European leaders to formulate a better framework to improve market access and investment conditions.

He also urged his colleagues, converged at the Bella Center, to strive to undertake further bridge-building efforts which has become more crucial after the Sept 11 incident.

He said that a better framework to improve market access was necessary for the attainment of a closer economic partnership between Asia and Europe, which in the process could enhance economic growth contributing to the overall progress in the social sphere for its combined population of two billion.

Addressing some 21 heads of state at the Bella Center, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, he said that progress in the social aspects would help achieve social cohesion which in "turn may help counter some of the root causes of intolerance and extremism."

ASEM, an informal process of dialogue and cooperation, comprises 10 Asian countries and 15 European Union (EU) members and the European Commission.

Its inaugural summit was held in Bangkok in 1996, followed by a second gathering in London in 1998 and the last in Seoul in 2000. Vietnam has offered to host the next summit in 2004.

While ASEM has demonstrated its capability to a great extent as evident by the exchange programme involving some 5,000 students between both continents on a Fellowship Programme and the ASEM Trust Fund to finance technical assistance and advice on the restructuring of the financial sector and on finding ways to address poverty, Rasmussen said: "We must not let our impressive track record slow our pace (and) much work remains to be done."

"We must reject any attempt by extremist forces to divide the international community on the basis of race, ethnic background or religious persuasion," he added.

After the opening ceremony, leaders proceeded for their first closed-door political dialogue focusing on the international situation in the aftermath of Sept 11 and new security issues.

Dr Mahathir is expected to push forward the need to identify the root causes in discussions on combating the menace. He is also scheduled to hold bilateral meetings with French President Jacques Chirac, Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and EC President Romano Prodi.

Tomorrow, Dr Mahathir will co-chair the session on cultural and educational issues: human resource development and educational exchange -- fostering mutual understanding, reducing poverty and increasing employability.

The summit ends tomorrow.

-- BERNAMA

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