

01 NOV 2002

Asean-Preparation

CAMBODIA PREPARES TO WELCOME LEADERS TO EIGHTH ASEAN SUMMIT

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PHNOM PENH, Nov 1 (Bernama) -- The Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh is a hive of activity as it prepares to welcome regional leaders to the Eighth Asean Summit, the first ever to be hosted by this Indo-Chinese country since it joined the grouping in 1999.

In the run-up to the two-day summit themed "Towards a Community of Southeast Asian Nations" beginning Monday, Asean senior officials have started a series of preparatory meetings to map the way forward for the region as a security blanket is thrown over the city.

The leaders of the 10 Asean member countries will be joined in Phnom Penh by their counterparts from China, Japan and South Korea for the accompanying Asean+3 Summit as well as the summits between Asean and each of the three countries involved.

Apart from enhancing economic cooperation, Asean leaders are expected to give special focus on efforts to fight terrorism in a region jolted by a spate of bombings by suspected terrorists on the Indonesian resort island of Bali and Zamboanga in the Philippines last month.

Asean watchers will be keen to know how the leaders propose to deal with the issue which has arguably affected investors' sentiment towards Southeast Asia and slowed down the number of tourist arrivals to holiday destinations across the region.

Malaysia will be represented by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who is scheduled to arrive in Phnom Penh on Sunday.

In the various talks and discussions, Kuala Lumpur is expected to continue to persuade other Asean members on the need to set up the Asean+3 Secretariat in the Malaysian capital to coordinate and monitor all the activities and projects involving the grouping and the three East Asian powerhouses.

According to an Asean Secretariat document, Asean and China will sign a framework agreement on economic cooperation that paves the way for a free trade area (FTA) within a decade.

The proposed Asean-China FTA was endorsed at the Asean-China Summit in Brunei in November last year.

In addition, the leaders of Asean and Japan are expected to endorse a declaration to commence consideration of a framework agreement towards the establishment of the Asean-Japan Closer Economic Partnership.

Asean and Japan continue to be important trading partners with trade volume between both sides totalling US\$108.4 billion in 2001.

And for the first time, Asean will convene a summit meeting with India, seen as a great market for Asean products and a good trading partner.

Meanwhile, soon after his arrival here on Sunday, Dr Mahathir will be whisked to the Chak Angre district where he is scheduled to open a power plant owned by Cambodia Utilities Pte Ltd, a subsidiary of Malaysia's business grouping, Leader Universal Holdings Bhd.

The prime minister will then return to Phnom Penh where he will meet members of the Malaysian community in Cambodia before attending a working dinner for Asean heads of state and government.

Asean was formed in 1967, comprising initially its founding members -- Malaysia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand. It was later joined by Brunei, Vietnam, Laos, Myanmar and Cambodia.

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