

27/06/2002

Canberra hopeful of amicable solution over Asem

PETALING JAYA, Wed. - Despite Malaysia's opposition to Australia's participation in the Asia-Europe trade forum (Asem), Canberra is hopeful the matter can be resolved amicably one day.

"While we respect Malaysia's regional policy, our view remains that Australia has something constructive to contribute to this regional institution and we hope a time will come that we can resolve this successfully," said Australian High Commissioner to Malaysia, Peter Varghese.

He said Australia would continue to support these regional institutions which include Asean and Asean+3 because "Southeast Asian nations are important to us".

Varghese who spoke at a seminar on Malaysia-Australia relations organised by the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations here today, said Australia did not object to the formation of Asean+3.

"We do not wish to stop this process at all. And if Asean+3 thinks Australia has a role to play, we would too."

He said Australia's objection to the Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's idea on setting up the East Asian Economic Caucus a decade ago was because "Apec was in its formative years and it was our number one priority at that time".

"On Asem, Malaysia opposes our participation but we have our own strong views. We do have a constructive contribution to make."

Asked if the eventual change in Malaysian leadership could result in a change in Malaysian policy over the matter, he said:

"I do not comment on domestic politics. But being an optimist that I am, I see things getting better ... that Malaysia becomes more pragmatic and accommodating."

Commenting on suggestions that it was under the leadership of Dr Mahathir that Australia-Malaysia relations soured, Varghese conceded that while Australia experienced reasonably easy relationships with Malaysia under Tunku Abdul Rahman and Tun Abdul Razak, "the world changes and not surprisingly there is no straight line from what we used to have."

(END)