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Dialogue key to co-operation

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SECURITY is high on the agenda of the Eighth Asean Summit which gets underway in Phnom Penh today. The question of security has been a major item at every meeting, conference, summit and caucus since Sept 11, 2001.

The bombings in Bali and Zamboanga have brought the region's security arrangements into sharper focus. But Asean secretary-general Rodolfo Severino says other issues, including economic, trade, tourism and indeed comprehensive economic co-operation and partnership are all interlinked.

As such he says there is no one issue that will overshadow or dominate another at the Eighth Asean Summit.

The question of security is not new. Asean leaders have demonstrated their political commitment to combat terrorism and other forms of transnational crime.

An Asean Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism has been issued.

Several anti-terrorism measures, including information exchange, co-operation in legal and law enforcement matters, institutional capacity building, training and extra-regional co-operation have been adopted.

In addition, Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines signed the Agreement on Information Exchange and Establishment of Communication Procedures to counter terrorism and other transnational crime. Co-operation also takes place within the broader context of the Asean Regional Forum (ARF).

Asean and Chinese senior officials, who met ahead of their leaders, have agreed on a declaration to avoid an outbreak of hostilities in the region.

The Foreign Ministers of China and Asean are expected to sign the declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea on the first day of the summit.

A consensus was reached with claimants, non-claimants and China, and "the text stipulates the countries of Asean and China restrain from any activities that would escalate or that would complicate the relations among themselves, to exercise restraint, and to help any persons in distress" China, Taiwan and four Asean countries claim portions of territory and the waters around the Spratly Islands and several other atolls in the South China Sea.

Analysts note that the South China Sea is a strategic route for trade and military ships with some 25 per cent of world shipping moving through the South China Sea.

There is thus a need to ensure safe passage of goods and people in the region.

Asean members have shown that they are able to take the bull by the horn and deal with issues that others view as contentious, including multinational claims. According to Severino, a joint statement on terrorism would be issued during the summit to express concern over the recent spate of attacks in Indonesia and the Philippines.

"They will stress their commitment to anti-terrorism and say that Asean is doing practical things to combat terrorism."

An anti-terror centre is to be set up in Kuala Lumpur. But even as Asean members are taking concrete steps to deal with the problem, developed countries are not helping with their "travel advisories".

Western Governments, including the US and Australia, issued travel warnings for most Southeast Asian nations recently, including Singapore,

Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand.

"I think there is an unconscious effort to identify Southeast Asia with terrorism because of the large number of Muslims in this area," Severino said.

He pointed out that no travel advisories were issued following the Sept 11 attacks.

The co-operation among Asean members has been undertaken even before the Sept 11 and Bali attacks.

There is deep concern about terrorism due to its impact on human life, security and economic well-being of the region.

A landmark Tourism Agreement aimed at strengthening the tourism industry and enhancing intra-regional travel among member countries will be also signed.

Severino says: "We can't give up. We will make travel in the region much easier and subjected to less hassle but at the same time not compromising safety and security."

The East Asian region, which represents 23 per cent of the world's gross domestic product (GDP) and 40 per cent of its foreign reserves, remains an attractive investment destination.

East Asia constitutes about one third of the world's population, which according to the Asean secretariat statement, "points to the potential size of the growing East Asian market in the foreseeable future".

The signing of the Framework Agreement on Comprehensive Economic Co-operation between Asean and China will create the world's largest free trade area. This will give rise to new avenues for intraregional trade and investment.

With enhanced efficiency through economies of scale and a larger market, there are more opportunities to tap capital and talent. China and Asean also signed a memorandum of understanding (MoU) on Agriculture Co-operation. Asean members are the first countries to be offered the kind of co-operation in agriculture by China.

As a major agricultural producer and as a highly protected industry in many countries, including Japan and even China, the MoU for agriculture is seen as a major step forward for China and its active participation in the world trade negotiations under the auspices of the World Trade Organisation.

Countries are lining up to engage the regional grouping.

The US, which issued a travel advisory to its citizens on Friday, is nevertheless eager to reap economic benefits.

US President George Bush announced the Enterprise for Asean Initiative (EAI) "an integral part of America's overall agenda for trade, economic growth, hope and opportunity".

According to the White House, it offers the prospect of bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) between the US and Asean members.

Even as the grouping is attracting an increasing number of suitors, the leaders are conscious of the need for greater integration among the 10 members at different levels of development.

For this the Initiative for Asean Integration (IAI) has been launched and leaders agreed to develop a Roadmap for Integration of Asean (RAI) to make regional integration the centre of Asean co-operation, providing a framework for a more coherent implementation of the regional integration programme.

Among the areas being looked into are infrastructure development, human resource development, information and communication technology and the regional economic integration in the newer members - Cambodia, Laos, Vietnam and Myanmar.

By last month, 10 arrangements worth US\$26.5 billion (RM100.7 billion)

had been concluded and another four were being negotiated.

Seven countries had agreed to exchange data on short-term capital flows.

The closer co-operation of the East Asian countries - has been in the making for some time.

Malaysia first proposed it in 1991 but was vehemently opposed by the US, the grouping is emerging in the form of the Asean Plus Three.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is expected to raise the possibility of setting up a bureau, a mechanism to promote co-operation with the grouping's dialogue partners.