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Economic ties and terrorism on Koizumi's Asean agenda

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ECONOMIC co-operation and a common agenda against terrorism will feature in discussions between Japanese Prime Minister Junichiro Koizumi and Asean leaders during his week-long visit to five Asean nations from today.

He will also touch on joint efforts towards economic reform in the region and the establishment of people-to-people relationship to strengthen ties between Japan and the grouping.

"I would like to confirm our interest in developing a relationship with Asean leaders for the orientation of our foreign policy on Southeast Asia," he told a Press conference on the eve of his departure.

Koizumi, who will meet Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad tomorrow, said he was interested in a "heart-to-heart" relationship between Japan and Asean nations on the basis of the policy established by former Japanese Prime Minister Takeo Fukuda in the late 1970s.

"Twenty-five years ago, my political mentor Fukuda visited Manila and made the Fukuda speech. It stressed that Japan and Asean nations should advance together and develop in a spirit of heart-to-heart contact.

"While Japanese prime ministers have come and gone, the policy has remained unchanged. I would like to build on the Fukuda spirit."

Koizumi, who said he was looking forward to meeting Dr Mahathir, felt that Japan and Malaysia could get down to discussing the specifics of co-operation in education and human resource development as had been proposed by the latter during the Asean+3 (Japan, South Korea and China) meeting in Brunei in November.

Describing Dr Mahathir's suggestions as good, he said implementation could follow soon after details had been ironed out.

"I respect him as a very learned person and a man of strong leadership. I have been Prime Minister for less than a year and he has been at the helm for more than 20 years.

"He has numerous insights into what leadership is and the future of Asia. I have a lot to learn from him on not only Japan-Malaysia relations but also on the overall political situation in Asia."

Koizumi said he sought to build an economic community with Asean nations to promote a sense of unity, adding that the first step in this direction was an economic agreement to be signed with Singapore during his visit to the republic.

While he did not preclude the possibility of similar agreements with other Asean nations, he said this could come later as the other countries had different circumstances.

Touching on Japan's relationship with China, he said it had to be seen in the wider context of ties with Asean nations, Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

"I want to expand Japan's relations in the region to include China, Asean nations, South Korea, Australia, New Zealand and the US," he said, adding that Japan's relationship with China was very important given their proximity.

On Indonesia, he said political stability was vital for economic development and that it needed to undertake reforms in various sectors.

Asked about speculation that Japan's Overseas Development Aid to Indonesia may be reduced, he said Japan was reviewing the assistance following difficult financial conditions in the country.

"We will continue to give aid to Indonesia. We will discuss what kind of

aid is needed."

On East Timor, he said Japan would participate in the peacekeeping effort by deploying its Self Defence Forces engineering unit.

Earlier, the journalists sang "Happy Birthday" to Koizumi who turns 60 today.

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