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Asean-Summit
STRONG SHOW OF SOLIDARITY BY ASEAN LEADERS

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PHNOM PENH, Nov 4 (Bernama) -- Regional leaders meeting here under one of the most trying periods emerged strongly from the first day of their 8th Asean Summit, vowing to restore confidence in Southeast Asia in the wake of terror bombings in the region.

The 10-member grouping also got off to a morale-boosting start in the two-day summit by formalising a pact with China to begin a Free Trade Area (FTA) by 2010, giving hope to the potential emergence of the largest economic bloc in the world.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his Asean colleagues issued a stern declaration denouncing terrorism and threw their support behind Indonesia and the Philippines to fight the scourge.

In a show of solidarity, the leaders said at the end of their meeting today that they would hold their 9th summit next year in Bali, the scene of the terror bombing that killed more than 180 people, mostly foreigners, on Oct 12.

In the two-page declaration, the leaders slammed foreign governments for advising their citizens to avoid Southeast Asia without substantial proof of possible terrorist attacks.

"We urge the international community to support Asean's efforts to combat terrorism and restore business confidence in the region.

"We are determined to cooperate actively in mitigating the adverse impact of terrorist attacks on Asean countries and urge the international community to assist us in these efforts," they said in the declaration.

Briefing Malaysian reporters, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said Dr Mahathir impressed upon the meeting that the root causes of terrorism must be addressed as the problem could not be resolved solely through military means.

China's Premier Zhu Rongji also pledged support to help Asean fight terrorism, and in a strong vote of confidence for Asean, he said the two must push forward their relations to a new stage of all-round development.

In a statement by host Prime Minister Hun Sen on behalf of the leaders, the grouping welcomed Thailand's decision to accede to an agreement to exchange information with Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Cambodia to suppress terrorist activities in the region.

In their first Asean response to the situation in Iraq, the Asean leaders called on Baghdad to comply with United Nations resolutions and eliminate all weapons of mass destruction.

On the economic front, the leaders directed their economic ministers to fast-track priority sectors and take stronger measures to boost Asean competitiveness in the face of rapid globalisation.

Asean leaders today also signed a tourism agreement to promote Southeast Asia as a single tourist destination and to relax intra-Asean travel procedures.

In a major boost for regional security, Asean and China signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea to defuse tensions on the overlapping claims over the Spratly islands.

"This important advancement of China-Asean relations marks a higher level of political trust between the two sides and will contribute to regional peace and stability," said Zhu.

Syed Hamid said Malaysia welcomed China's participation in the declaration.

"The fact that we are able to sign the declaration is one of our biggest achievements. It took four years and today it has been signed," he said.

He said Asean leaders had also tasked their foreign ministers to study the idea of a summit with Australia over the coming year.

Meanwhile, the Asean leaders expressed their appreciation of the grouping's outgoing secretary-general Rodolfo Severino after his five-year term.

He will be replaced by Singaporean diplomat Ong Keng Yong for the 2003-2007 term.

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