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Hoping for softer Indonesian stance

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MALAYSIA hopes that Indonesia will soften its stand and support Kuala Lumpur's bid to host the secretariat of the Asean+3, a de facto East Asian economic grouping.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who arrived in this tourist capital of Bali yesterday for a two-day working visit to Indonesia, is expected to discuss the proposal along with a host of other issues with Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri during their bilateral talks today.

"We are hopeful that Dr Mahathir will raise the issue during his meeting with Megawati and (Thai Prime Minister) Thaksin Shinawatra," Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar told Malaysian journalist yesterday, hours before the Prime Minister arrived at Ngurah Rai International Airport.

Thaksin will join Dr Mahathir and Megawati to witness the signing of the trilateral agreement between Malaysia, Indonesia and Thailand on rubber production, aimed at stabilising the price of rubber and give producers a better return.

Syed Hamid said Malaysia had excellent political, social and economic relations with Indonesia and hoped Indonesia would consider its historic ties with Malaysia and support its proposal for an Asean+3 secretariat in Kuala Lumpur.

"We have very good relations with Indonesia. That's why we continue to invest in Indonesia and have become the largest investor in Indonesia," he said.

At the Asean Ministerial Meeting in Bandar Seri Begawan two weeks ago, Indonesia and Singapore did not support Malaysia's offer to host the Asean+3 secretariat.

Syed Hamid said Indonesia had no reason to fear the setting up of the Asean+3 secretariat because it would not downplay or render as redundant the role of the Asean secretariat in Jakarta.

"Asean+3 secretariat will enhance the grouping's efforts to strengthen relations in the various sectors which need co-operation. Asean itself has many issues to deal with. The role of Asean+3 will be different. It will not be a competitor but will complement the efforts of Asean."

Syed Hamid said an Asean+3 secretariat was of paramount importance as the future depended on a stronger East Asian relations.

"So we should welcome the efforts of Japan, Korea and China who want East Asia institutionalised and work as a community."

The secretariat, he said, was also important to expedite the institutionalisation of the Asean+3 as a formal grouping.

"We have even offered a seed capital of US\$10 million (RM38 million) and will fund the operational cost of the secretariat for the first five years of its inception. Our intention should not be viewed suspiciously."

He said Indonesia, which Malaysia considered a close friend, should understand Malaysia's intentions and support its proposal.

"They say Asean cannot make an immediate decision because it is an organisation which takes one step at a time. But there are times when we have to take a quick step.

"In this context, we can see that Asean+3 is no longer an illusion. There are specific projects and programmes under Asean+3. So the grouping should be institutionalised and there should be a secretariat to expedite

the implementation of these programmes."

Asked whether Malaysia has been too rigid in its proposal, Syed Hamid said Malaysia was open to suggestions.

"We spoke about the concept, structure and funding for the early years of its inception. Other details can be discussed, and we are open to suggestions," he said.

"If we look back at history, we will realise that Malaysia has been flexible in its proposals for an East Asian grouping.

"When Malaysia first proposed that an East Asian grouping should be institutionalised, there were objections. We then renamed it East Asian Economic Caucus. It was still unacceptable, so we change it to Asean+3," he said, adding that this spoke volumes of how flexible Malaysia was.

Syed Hamid said Malaysia felt that the Asean+3 should be institutionalised because co-operation among Asean, Japan, Korea and China covered many areas.

"Asean+3 Ministers and senior officials of the various portfolios meet every year to discuss wide-ranging issues.

"So why can't we have a body that will co-ordinate the projects and programmes and to ensure there is no duplication with other organisations?"

Ironically, Syed Hamid said, Thailand, the Philippines and Singapore were receptive to a suggestion by Japan at the recent Asean Regional Forum that an ARF secretariat be set up.

These countries felt the ARF should keep up with the changes taking place globally.

"We feel the time is right for us to suggest that an Asean+3 secretariat should be set up. We don't make suggestions in a vacuum.

"We are disappointed, but we understand that in diplomacy, sometimes things do not happen as quickly as we hope it would. Unfortunately, we don't have a magic wand to make it happen as fast as we want it to be."

Syed Hamid also said Dr Mahathir and Megawati would discuss the issue of Indonesian workers in Malaysia and the repatriation of Indonesian illegals.

Both leaders will later today witness the signing of an agreement on foreign workers, which will include details of repatriation methods.

"We have 450,000 Indonesian illegals in Malaysia. It is therefore important for us to agree on the methods of repatriation, including the cost of doing so.

"Indonesia also wants us to do away with the current restrictions imposed by the Malaysian Government, allowing Indonesians to work only in the plantation sector and as domestic maids," he said.

Commenting on foreign news reports that Malaysia ill-treated Indonesian workers and illegal immigrants, Syed Hamid said Malaysia was the only country in the world which treated foreign workers well.

"There is no other country that can match the treatment that we give to foreign workers.

"We are not inviting foreigners to come and work in our country. But if there are economic sectors in need of foreign workers, then they should come through the proper channel.

"Even when they come in illegally, we still treat them well. We are humane in our dealings with them. Sadly, there are reports which say that we ill-treat them."

Dr Mahathir attended a dinner hosted by Megawati at Istana Tampaksiring.