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ASEM-MALAYSIA

M'SIA HOPES TO BE SOUTH-EAST ASIAN INFO HUB FOR ASEM

By: Mikhail Raj Abdullah

COPENHAGEN, Sept 21 (Bernama) -- In what could propel its standing as an information and communications centre, Malaysia hopes to be the Southeast Asian information hub under Asia and Europe's joint endeavour to develop a Trans-Asia Information Network.

The network is aimed at bridging the information gap between Europe and Asia in the political, socio and economic aspects and in the process create widespread collaboration in new areas and strengthen institutional relationships.

Leaders from both continents meeting during the fourth Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) beginning Monday, are expected to discuss the initiative which would complete the inter-continental linkage with France designated as the hub for Europe and South Korea for North Asia.

Providing an insight into issues to be discussed at the ASEM summit for which Denmark is hosting amid tight security, Ministry of Foreign Affairs Secretary-General, Datuk Ahmad Fuzi Abdul Razak, said the Ministry of Energy, Communications and Multimedia would be the lead agency to operationalise such an initiative.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, is expected to arrive here Sunday with his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, from London for the meeting.

ASEM is an informal process of dialogue and cooperation bringing together 15 European Union (EU) members and the European Commission with 10 Asian countries, namely, Brunei, China, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Dr Mahathir is also scheduled to hold bilateral meetings with Italian President, Silvio Berlusconi and European Commission President, Romano Prodi while a meeting with French President, Jacques Chirac is being worked upon.

Ahmad Fuzi, who spoke to Malaysain journalists on the sidelines of the senior officials meeting here today at the sprawling Bella Centre complex, said another issue of interest to Malaysia was the proposed establishment of the Asia-Europe Institute.

The institute, which comes under ASEM's educational exchange initiative, is currently located at Universiti Malaya offering a Masters programme to students from both continents.

He also said that Asian and European leaders were expected to dwell into Danish Prime Minister, Anders Fogh Rasmussen's statement as the host when the summit ends.

Other issues include declarations on terrorism and peace in the Korean Peninsula to be issued after the two-day gathering of leaders.

As for the declaration on terrorism, he said that discussions would include peace initiatives in efforts to combat terrorism.

Here, Dr Mahathir could be expected to espouse Malaysia's consistent position since the Sept 11 attacks on the United States, that besides condemning all forms of terrorism and supporting efforts to combat the menace, it was equally important to finding the root causes of terrorism, without which, the fight against it would be that much harder.

Prior to Monday's ASEM summit, leaders from the two continents would meet for an informal working dinner Sunday night whereby recent regional developments would be deliberated upon.

Some of the issues that might be discussed under this topic include

developments in Southeast Asia including security issues in the South China Sea, peace in the Korean Peninsula, Asean plus three (Asean+3) cooperation and enlargement of the European Union,

Asean diplomats said that the Asean+3 initiative is essentially the East Asian Economic Grouping initiated by Malaysia which is crucial to forge a greater cohesion among its economies especially in times of economic and financial crises.

Ahmad Fuzy said that the ASEM summit would begin Monday morning with a political dialogue in the International situation in the aftermath of Sept 11 and New Security Issues which would include transnational crime.

Here, diplomats said Dr Mahathir could take advantage of the topic to highlight Malaysia's endeavour to deal with the illegal immigrants issue and the difficulties and criticism it faces.

This would be followed by a luncheon dialogue on cultures and civilisations with the theme on "Unity in Diversity."

In the afternoon, leaders would again converge for discussions on economic cooperation with emphasis on regional economic and financial priorities in the context of the global economic situation.

On Tuesday, the final day of the summit, leaders would touch on social, cultural and educational issues with focus on human resource development and educational exchange as well as fostering mutual understanding, reducing poverty and increasing employability.

Dr Mahathir will hold a press conference on Tuesday after the summit ends.

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