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Asean-Mahathir

MAHATHIR A MAJOR FORCE IN BUILDING ASEAN, SAYS SEVERINO

By: Muin Abdul Majid

PHNOM PENH, Nov 2 (Bernama) -- Asean secretary-general Rodolfo Severino today described Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as a "major force" in the regional grouping and a leader with the "backbone" to do the best for Malaysia.

"I have known Dr Mahathir for a long time and I've always held him in great respect because he has a very clear idea of what is good for his country and the necessary backbone to carry out the policies that he thinks are good for his country," Severino said when met on the sidelines of the Asean senior officials meeting in the run-up to the 8th Asean Summit beginning here Monday.

The diplomat was asked to articulate his tribute to Dr Mahathir, who had announced that he would step down as prime minister after the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) Summit in Kuala Lumpur in October next year.

Severino said Dr Mahathir had shown his leadership quality and done a "marvellous job" in promoting the unity of the Malaysian nation which has a multi-ethnic population.

Severino, who is serving his final year as the Asean secretary-general, also shot down a question from an Australian network reporter that Dr Mahathir had always opposed the expansion of Asean.

He said Dr Mahathir had been a prime mover of Asean's expansion, including in bringing in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar and Vietnam.

The journalist then asked whether Dr Mahathir would go along with an Asean+Australia summit.

Severino said the convening of such a meeting had not been decided by Asean.

The Asean Summit here will be followed by the collective Asean+3 summit with China, Japan, South Korea as well as separate summit with each of the countries involved as well as India.

Severino said such high-level meetings were an indication of the Asean policy of reaching out to its neighbours, particularly the three East Asian countries.

He also said that discussions had been going on for years on how to promote Asean trade and investment linkages with Australia and New Zealand.

-- BERNAMA

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