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Plus 3 Secretariat plan gets a boost

reports on "Asean Ministerial Meeting 2002" by Saiful Azhar Abdullah; MALAYSIA'S efforts to institutionalise Asean+3 took another step forward yesterday when Asean senior officials agreed to include Malaysia's proposal to set up a secretariat in Kuala Lumpur in the draft joint communique of the 35th Asean Ministerial Meeting.

The draft, prepared yesterday, states that the member countries have resolved to further strengthen Asean+3 co-operation.

"In this context, we noted the need to strengthen the Asean secretariat in Jakarta and Malaysia's offer to host the Asean+3 in Kuala Lumpur."

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, who arrived yesterday to attend the AMM today, said the inclusion of Malaysia's proposal was important.

"We want it to be recorded in the agenda as a subject which has been discussed, or otherwise the idea would remain in the `corridor'.

"But now it is in the `public domain', although we have not arrived at a final decision," he said when asked to comment on the matter.

An observer said the inclusion of Malaysia's plan in the joint communique is a victory for Malaysia. There was an attempt by certain member countries to "neutralise" the idea by saying members had failed to reach a consensus.

With the inclusion, the Foreign Ministers are expected to deliberate on the idea tomorrow at their retreat.

Consequently, the proposal will be discussed by the Asean Heads of Government at their summit in Cambodia in November.

Malaysia has also offered to fund the establishment and operations cost of the secretariat. Malaysia has proposed seed funding of US\$10 million (RM38 million) to cover the first five years of the secretariat's operations.

Asean+3 groups all 10 Southeast Asian countries and three Northeast Asian countries - Japan, China and South Korea.

Asked how he would convince his counterparts at the retreat, Syed Hamid said he would assure the Foreign Ministers that the Asean+3 Secretariat would not take the "shine" away or overlap the functions of the Asean Secretariat in Jakarta.

"Generally, the members are convinced and there is no rejection of the idea. It will not take away the shine from the Asean Secretariat. The Asean Secretariat has its own agenda while Asean+3 is a different ball game entirely.

"It is a bigger co-operative body ... it should be good for Asean without diluting or outshining the Asean Secretariat," he said, adding that the idea of having a bureau or unit within the Asean Secretariat would not make its functions effective and efficient.

Syed Hamid said Malaysia had an impression that there was already a consensus among the member countries when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad raised it in Brunei last year.

"Now it is a question of in what form. We admit there are a lot of questions asked about its modalities and unknown factors and what our direction is move after five years but all these questions have been explained by Malaysia," he said.