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WESTERN GOVTS SHOULD HEED ASEAN'S ADVISORY APPEAL

SINGAPORE, Nov 15 (Bernama) -- Western governments should heed Asean leaders' appeal to avoid indiscriminately advising their citizens to stay away from South-East Asia, the Straits Times said.

"It is important that they moderate their travel warnings and take into account the tighter security measures in different countries. Nothing will please the terrorists more than to have Western governments panicking and bundling up all their citizens at home," it said in its editorial.

The newspaper said that it is reasonable for Western governments fearful for the safety of their citizens to warn them about the perils of travelling abroad at a time when many countries have become targets for terrorist attacks.

"It is unreasonable when panicky governments turn precaution into paranoia. This happens when they insist on issuing blanket warnings telling their citizens to avoid South-East Asia altogether," it said.

This, it said, is what Australia, Denmark, Germany and Britain have done. The United States has also issued travel warnings for 11 countries, among them Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand, "even when advised by their envoys, who know better than cloistered State Department bureaucrats, that these three Asean states be exempted."

Travel warnings which are much broader than what they have to be, are needlessly alarmist and this is not helpful to the Asean countries which rely heavily on tourism to perk up their flagging economies, said the Straits Times.

"By being alarmist, Western governments play straight into the hands of the terrorists, whose primary mission is to spread panic and fear. Sadly, Western governments which do not take into account the different situations in South-East Asian countries fall into the trap. They do no favour to themselves or the Asean countries."

"The Australian government has been trying hard to build bridges with Asean states, but its travel advisories after the Bali bombs will not win it more friends in the region. There is no virtue in branding South-East Asia as a dangerous place and tarring all the Asean countries with the same brush."

To single out South-East Asia, it noted, was manifestly unfair when there are terrorist cells the world over. "No Asean government has told its citizens not to travel to the United States after the Sept 11 terrorist attacks."

At a time when governments ought to be cooperating to weed out the terrorists and helping each other to tighten security measures, Australia's actions, it added, will make things more difficult, not just for itself but for the Asean countries as well.

"No wonder Malaysian Prime Minister (Datuk Seri Dr) Mahathir Mohamad has hit back at Canberra by declaring that Australia is unsafe for Muslims, pointing to the recent police raids targeting Muslims living there," the Straits Times editorial said.

-- BERNAMA

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