

Asean leaders plan tribute to Dr M

NUSA DUA (Bali): Southeast Asian leaders are planning a special tribute to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at his farewell Asean summit here this week, officials said yesterday.

Asia's longest-serving elected leader arrives today on the eve of a two-day Asean summit, keeping a tight schedule even during his swansong, scheduling bilateral talks with leaders from China, South Korea, Myanmar, Vietnam and Indonesia.

Asean secretary-general Ong Keng Yong said the region would lose a "strong, colourful personality" when Mahathir, 77, steps down as premier on Oct 31 after 22 years in power.

"The leaders want to acknowledge his contribution to Asean cooperation and cohesion, and bid him bon voyage," Ong told AFP.

"His legacy is his forthright analysis

of situations, calling a spade a spade, and always coming up with bold ideas. He speaks his mind and he has been proven right on many occasions.

"The feeling in Asean is that a strong colourful personality like Dr Mahathir and his style will be missed."

Summit host Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri will deliver a tribute and present a memento – a photograph of Asean leaders signed by all of them – to Mahathir at the start of the summit tomorrow, officials say.

With the exception of Brunei's Sultan Hassanah Bolkiah, who succeeded his father in 1967, Mahathir is the longest serving leader in the regional grouping founded in 1967.

He is the last of Asean's old guard, who included Ferdinand Marcos of the Philippines, Indonesia's Suharto and Singapore's Lee Kuan Yew.

Mahathir will hand the leadership

over to his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, after hosting the Organisation of the Islamic Conference summit in Kuala Lumpur and going on to Bangkok for his international swansong at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit.

The doctor-turned-politician has been a trenchant critic of the West. He ignored western pressure and let military-ruled Myanmar into the Asean fold during Malaysia's chairmanship in 1997.

He has, however, made clear his unhappiness with the generals' latest crackdown, and told AFP in July that Myanmar might one day have to be expelled from Asean.

It was also Mahathir who initiated and pushed Asean+3, an idea which he suggested in 1990 as a counterweight to the trade blocs formed in Europe and North America. – Agencies