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APEC-LAUNCHER

BANGKOK, Oct 15 (Bernama) -- The United States wants the production, shipment and sale of the Manned Portable Air Defence System or rocket launcher to be suppressed in a move to curb terrorist attacks.

The Director-General of Thailand's Foreign Affairs Ministry, Sihasak Phuanketkeaw, said the US made the proposal during the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation's (Apec) Senior Officials Meeting (SOM) which ended here today.

He said it was made by the American officials in view of threat from the use of such weapons as happened to the Kenyan economy following an attack on a commercial airliner in the country last year.

In the November 2002 incident, the terrorist group Al Qaeda was believed to be involved in the suicide bombing of an Israeli-owned resort hotel in Kenya that killed 13 people and the nearly simultaneous unsuccessful missile attack on an Israeli charter jet.

Ten Kenyans and three Israelis were killed when three suicide bombers detonated a car bomb outside the Paradise Hotel in Mombasa. Within minutes, the airliner that was taking off from the Mombasa airport with 271 aboard was brushed by two shoulder-fired missiles.

Sihasak told a press conference at the end of SOM that the US told the 21-member nation meeting that the Kenyan economy was severely affected by the attack, which resulted in declining tourist arrivals and foreign investment.

He said matters concerning weapons such as the portable launcher would be further discussed by SOM next year while there was possibility it would be among the topics for discussion during the Apec Ministerial Meetings on Saturday and the Apec Leaders meeting on Monday and Tuesday.

President George W. Bush, his Russian counterpart, Vladimir Putin, and Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad are among the 21 Apec leaders expected at the meeting.

Earlier, Thai Foreign Minister Dr Sarakiart Sathirathai told reporters that Apec would remain an economic cooperation group and would not be turned into a security forum.

"But it will also discuss security issues such as terrorism, transnational crime and other important issues affecting Apec economies to ensure the free and safe economic environment of the region."

He said economic issues would be highlighted by Apec leaders on the first day of their informal meeting on Oct 20, while security issues affecting economic cooperation in the Apec region would be raised on the second day.

-- BERNAMA

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