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Mahathir-Tribute

ASEAN SUMMIT TO PAY TRIBUTE TO DR MAHATHIR

By: Salbiah Said and Openg Onn

NUSA DUA (Bali), Oct 5 (Bernama) -- Next week's gathering of Asean leaders on this popular Indonesian island resort of Bali will go down in history as a memorable event as the summit pays tribute to Malaysia's Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who will be retiring this month after steering the nation to progress for 22 years.

Indonesian President Megawati Soekarnoputri will take some sentimental moments after the signing of the historic Bali Concord II among the leaders on Tuesday to pay tribute to the spokesman of "New Asia" whose ideas, wisdom and vision have been a source of inspiration to many.

Dr Mahathir, 77, who has been in power since 1981, stunned the nation with his resignation announcement in June last year. He later agreed to continue to helm the government until October this year to ensure a smooth and orderly transition of power to his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

For the Association of Southeast Asian nations, Dr Mahathir's contributions will be cherished in the form of a memento to be presented by the Indonesian President in her capacity as the current chairperson of the regional grouping.

Under his guidance, Asean took on a more vibrant and dominant role, enjoying equal footing as other world groupings. It was during his tenure that Asean took Myanmar, Cambodia and Laos into its realm, thus broadening its sphere of influence and border.

Today, Asean has become a force to be reckoned with. From a mere grouping of friendly neighbours, it has transformed into a solid entity, establishing economic cooperation with key dialogue partners -- Japan, South Korea and China -- under the flagship of Asean plus three (Asean+3).

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

"Dr M", as he is popularly known, will no longer be at the centre stage of Asean after he retires, but having carved his name as a world icon, his ideas and views will always be much sought after.

Even as the day is drawing closer before Malaysia welcomes his successor, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, he continues to provide the beacon of light for Asean members to move ahead in facing the challenges.

Dr Mahathir had proposed recently that the countries of East Asia give a proper name to their regional grouping and stop hiding behind the title "Asean plus three."

The 10 members of Asean and their Northeast Asian neighbours -- China, Japan and South Korea -- are now holding an annual summit here. The Asean leaders will meet for two days from Tuesday.

Dr Mahathir said he would like to see the group renamed as the East Asian Economic Group, adding that the name Asean+3 was a throwback to a time when members were afraid of upsetting outsiders by their growing sense of unity.

"We would be very happy if we stopped hiding behind this spurious title and called ourselves the East Asia Economic Group," he told a conference on the region organised by Malaysia's Institute of Strategic and International Studies.

There is nervousness among some people and I don't know whether they

will accept this idea," said Dr Mahathir, who first suggested such a grouping in 1990 as a counterweight to the trade blocs formed in Europe and North America.

"The countries of East Asia should state openly that they want to form a single grouping like the North American Free Trade Area and the European Community," he added.

As this summit will be Dr Mahathir's last as Malaysia's Prime Minister, he remains in the limelight and a star attraction for the foreign press corp covering the summit.

According to Malaysian officials, more than 30 requests for interviews have been received from the foreign media.

However, due to the overwhelming requests, a joint media conference has been arranged for them on Wednesday.

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