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M'sia-Policy

KL SAYS IT UPHOLDS POLICY OF NON-INTERVENTION

SINGAPORE, July 24 (Bernama)--Malaysia upholds the policy of non-interference in the internal affairs of member states of Asean, a concept which has served the region well in the past, says Deputy Defence Minister Datuk Mohd Shafie Apdal.

But at the same time, Malaysia welcomed recent moves by certain countries to be transparent about their internal problems, he said in his keynote address at a regional security forum here today.

In the Asean ministerial meeting in Cambodia recently, Myanmar and Indonesia did the unprecedented by briefing the meeting about the situation in Yangon and Aceh respectively, he said.

Later, speaking to reporters, he said in the case of Myanmar, Malaysia had always maintained this policy, and its expulsion from Asean, as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, had stressed, would be the last resort.

Dr Mahathir had said that the Myanmar government should take firm action in maintaining peace in the region, failing which, tension could escalate to other parts of Asean, he said.

"We must ensure new members of Asean such as Myanmar adhere to advice," said the deputy minister.

Dr Mahathir had recently remarked that Myanmar might be expelled from the 10-member Asean if it refused to free pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, but stressed that Myanmar's expulsion from the grouping, should only be used as a last resort.

On whether economic sanction should be used against the Myanmar government, he said, this too, should be used as a last resort.

"If that (economic sanction) is a means to resolving the problem, why not, if that sort of step leads to success," said Mohd Shafie.

But then, he cautioned, "If we keep on implementing sanctions, and there's no success at all, such as what the US has done on Iraq and they've been sanctioned, the government and the people suffered."

He said the way to resolving the issue, was by peaceful means, such as delegations which were despatched through the United Nations.

Noting that non-intervention had been a "very fruitful kind of arrangement", he said: "We don't like to say something about how Singapore governs the country, for instance."

"But, if problems in a member state pose a threat that spills over to the entire region then I suppose, there is reason to (interfere), but there must be a solution to it."

"Before we allowed Myanmar to be part of Asean, there were steps to get the two groups together and get them to agree to certain degrees.. and they did agree and there was peace... and that's why we accepted them.. I don't see why that can't be achieved, if only parties could be more open in a way."

In his speech, Mohd Shafie said that there had been some talks that Malaysia would be asked to lead a team of observers to monitor the anticipated ceasefire in Southern Philippines.

"If there is an official request, we will consider it favourably, in the spirit of Asean cooperation. Let us hope that this mission will be successful if it materialises, as it would be a cornerstone for the future Asean constructive engagement," he said.

At a question-and-answer session, Mohd Shafie said that peace talks

were held with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) in Kuala Lumpur two years ago to resolve the problem in Southern Philippines.

Given the strong working relationship between Malaysia and the Philippine government, he said the latter had requested that Malaysia undertook the observer role in its talks with Abu Sayyaf.

Asked on Malaysia's non-interference policy in the affairs of Muslim minorities in other countries, he said as far as possible, as in the past, the government would only "raise our opinions, and not go for open debate," to assist governments to resolve the issue.

However, he said, "As Muslims, we need to protect our Muslim brothers if it touches on religion, but this again, must be done through peaceful means, and not through acts of terrorism.

-- BERNAMA

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