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APEC-SURPRISE

SURPRISE IN STORE FOR MAHATHIR AT APEC

By: Siti Hawa Othman and Arul Rajoo

BANGKOK, Oct 13 (Bernama) - The 11th Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) which kicks off with the senior official meeting (SOM) tomorrow, will likely have a big surprise for Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Host country, Thailand is not telling anything.

"It may be planning something, but it is a secret," the director-general of Thailand Foreign Affairs Ministry, Sihasak Phuanketkeaw said in the first press briefing on APEC (from Oct 14-21) here today.

He said since this would be the last APEC meeting to be attended by the Malaysian Prime Minister, the leaders might be planning something as a show of appreciation for his untiring effort, contribution and support to APEC.

Sihasak was responding to a question from a journalist who wanted to know if there would be any special tribute planned by the organizers for Dr Mahathir.

Dr Mahathir is expected to arrive here on Oct 19 for the two-day APEC Economic Leaders meeting beginning on Oct 20.

The Prime Minister, who will retire at end of the month, was given an emotional farewell at his last Asean Summit in Bali last week, with a special tribute from a tearful Indonesian President Megawati Soekarnoputri.

As for security at APEC which will also see the attendance of United States President George Bush, Sihasak in his briefing assured that steps had been taken and measures had been put in place to ensure the security of the leaders attending this meeting.

He is confident that the situation will be under control as Thailand has the full support and cooperation from other member countries to ensure top security at the meeting.

In spelling out the programme, he said, SOM would be held at the Queen Sirikit Convention Centre for two-days, followed by the APEC Ministerial Meeting (AMM) from Oct 17-Oct 18 and the APEC Economic Leaders Meeting from Oct 20-21.

Meanwhile, the APEC CEO (chief executive officer) Summit, to be held at Shangri-La Hotel from Oct 19-21, will be opened by Thailand's Prime Minister, Thaksin Shinawatra.

The APEC Business Advisory Council (ABAC) meeting to be held at Royal Orchid Sheraton Hotel from Oct 17-21, will be officially opened by Thaksin on Oct 18.

Among the earliest leaders to arrive will be the President of Peru, Alejandro Toledo Manrique on Oct 17 for bilateral talks with Thaksin and the President of China, Hu Jintai, arriving on Oct 18, for a state visit.

President Bush is expected in Bangkok at about 10.40pm on Oct 18 while most of the other leaders on Oct 19.

The APEC Economic Leaders' Retreat 1 will be held at 2pm on Oct 20, to be followed by the interaction with ABAC and later in the evening, the leaders will be granted an audience with the King and Queen of Thailand.

The second retreat will be held on the morning of Oct 21 while the APEC Economic Leaders Declaration will be read at 1.15pm, followed by a press conference by host leader, Thaksin at 3pm.

The chair will then be passed to Chile which will be hosting the next APEC meeting. -- BERNAMA

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