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Aussie-Relations
AUSSIE CLASH OVER SOUTHEAST ASIA RELATIONS

MELBOURNE, April 25 (Bernama) -- Southeast Asia has been drawn into a political clash between the Howard Government and the Opposition Labour Party over the state of Australia's relations with the region.

Australia's Foreign Affairs Minister Alexander Downer said the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) was now prepared to work with Australia because it no longer went begging for acceptance across the region.

But his Opposition Labour counterpart, Kevin Rudd, accused the Howard Government of running down key Asia initiatives, saying the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum was close to death.

It follows the decision by ASEAN to invite Prime Minister John Howard and his New Zealand counterpart Helen Clark to the organisation's November meeting in Laos to discuss a possible free trade agreement.

Both Australia and NZ have long sought a trade agreement with ASEAN which includes 10 South-East Asian countries.

But their acceptance by ASEAN had been effectively vetoed by former Malaysian leader Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who retired Oct 31 last year. A trade deal would link the growing ASEAN economies with the Australia-NZ Closer Economic Relations (CER) free trade agreement.

Downer said although the retirement of Dr Mahathir had played a role in the new ASEAN offer, he put most weight on the changes Australia had undergone in recent years.

"I think one of the problems for Australia in its engagement with Asia for some period of time has been the sense of Australia breathlessly begging to participate rather than presenting itself as a very significant country that it is," he told the Channel 10 Network.

But Rudd said, although the offer from ASEAN was a positive step, the organisation was already well advanced in trade talks with both China and Japan.

He said the Howard Government had gone out of its way to undermine key policy objectives of the Hawke-Keating Labor Governments, to the detriment of Australia and the region.

"A huge amount of our regional machinery has fallen into disuse, all because John Howard couldn't stand a bar of anything he received from the Labour Party as the foreign policy inheritance of this country when he won the Prime Ministership back in 1996," Rudd told the Channel 9 Network.

Rudd said APEC, pushed by Australia to draw together China, Japan and the United States, had been deliberately undermined by Howard.

-- BERNAMA

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