

19 JUL 2004

Asem-Hamidah

MSIA TO PERSUADE MYANMAR TO BE MORE ACCOMMODATING

By: Mikhail Raj Abdullah

PARIS, July 19 (Bernama) -- Malaysia, together with Asean, will be better positioned to support Myanmar's inclusion into the Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) in Hanoi in October if Yangon is a bit more accommodating in initiating democratic reforms as well as freeing the democracy movement's leader, Aung San Suu Kyi.

"We hope the Myanmar authorities will let-up and do something as regards these issues raised by the European Union (EU)," Malaysia's new ambassador to France, Datuk Hamidah Mohamed Yusoff, said here Monday.

"That will make it easier for us to support Myanmar," she said when responding to questions on the stand-off between Asean and the EU over Myanmar's membership into Asem at a briefing at the Malaysian embassy here on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's upcoming working visit to France.

Hamidah, who took up her posting on July 2 this year, said that Asem was likely to be among issues to be discussed when Abdullah meets French President Jacques Chirac on Thursday.

Abdullah will be visiting France for the first time in his capacity as Prime Minister, at the invitation of Chirac.

The European countries want Myanmar to be kept out, but Asean contends that as part of the Asian grouping, Myanmar, together with Cambodia and Laos, should be allowed to join the dialogue forum between Asia and Europe.

In contrast, the EU would go to Hanoi with an expanded membership with the inclusion of 10 new members.

Hamidah said that although Myanmar seemed to be a sticking point in Asean-EU ties, "we want all of Asean to come into Asem."

Suu Kyi, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate who leads the National League for Democracy, won the 1990 election by a landslide but the military refused to hand over power to her. She is now under house arrest.

Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen had complained earlier this month that if the EU attended the summit as an expanded community of 25 members, Myanmar could not be excluded.

This has led to doubts over whether the Asem summit would take place as the EU called off two finance and economic ministerial meetings in June. But Hamidah shrugged off rumours that Asem would not be held, saying: "I know for a fact that President Chirac is going to the summit."

She said that the EU had no qualms about Cambodia and Laos joining up. "Sometimes, it's a bit difficult for us to persuade another (Asean) neighbour to see our point of view because of the policy of non-interference in the affairs of other member countries," she said.

She said that (former prime minister) Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and even now Abdullah and Special U.N. Representative to Myanmar Tan Sri Razali Ismail had tried very hard to talk to the Myanmar authorities "to let-up and do something" and "that will make it easier for other countries to support them."

Nevertheless, she said, Malaysia would continue to work to include Myanmar. Former Dutch Foreign Minister Hans van den Broek would travel to Asia next week to explore possible solutions and explain the EU's position.

Asem, set up in 1994, is an informal dialogue between EU member states and 10 Asian countries -- Brunei, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam, China, Japan and South Korea.

-- BERNAMA

MR MR JK