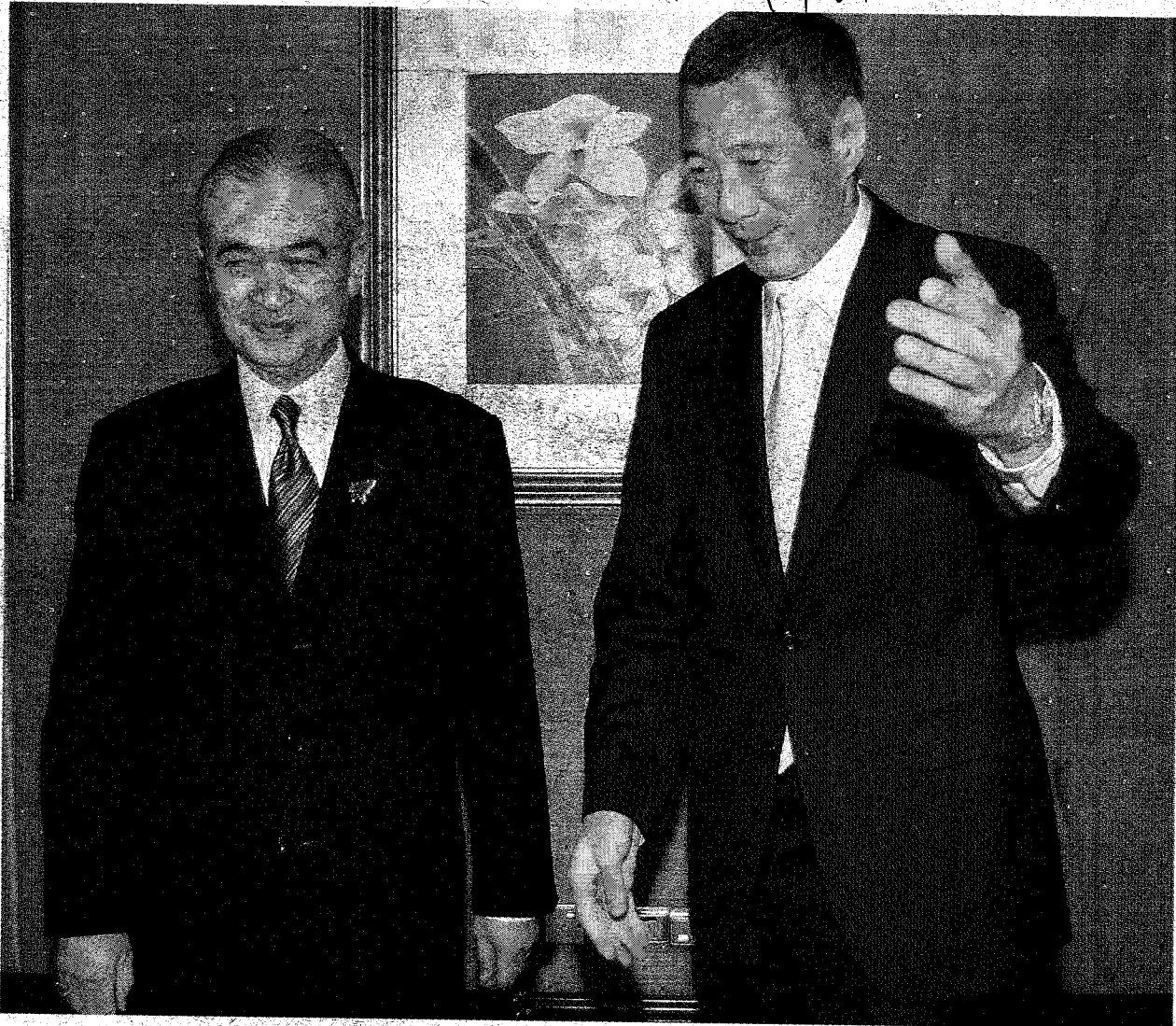


Gambari will not brief leaders on Myanmar

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Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong (right) welcoming Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi before the start of the Malaysia-Singapore bilateral meeting yesterday. — Bernama picture

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SINGAPORE: United Nations special envoy Ibrahim Gambari will not be briefing the 10 Asean heads of government and state as well as leaders of Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand and South Korea about the situation in Myanmar at the grouping's East Asian summit tomorrow.

Although it came as a surprise to some observers here, it is learnt that host Singapore had invited Gambari to brief leaders at the EAS without consulting all Asean member countries.

Asean works on the basis of consensus. Some of the members opposed the move as it was thought to be against Asean protocol.

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong said that Asean leaders agreed during their long dinner meeting last night that there was no need for Gambari to brief the EAS and the Asean summit as the issue was a domestic matter within Asean.

"(Myanmar) Prime Minister Thein Sein made it clear that the situation is a domestic affair and Myanmar was capable of handling

itself. The UN envoy should only report to the UN Security Council."

Lee added that Singapore, as host, would be willing to assist Gambari if he needed to brief leaders and officials here in an informal setting.

According to sources earlier, many Asean leaders were not happy with Gambari's planned briefing for the EAS.

"It's an issue about an Asean member. Why should it be briefed at the EAS when non-Asean members will also be there?"

"If Gambari wants to meet any of the EAS leaders on his own, Asean leaders have no problem with that. But to brief the EAS, no," said a source.

Yesterday, Asean foreign ministers spent about four hours discussing the preparation for the Asean Charter to be signed by the grouping's leaders today. They also touched on Gambari's presence at the summit.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said he was happy with Lee's announcement and said Asean would continue to maintain its principle of consensus in decision-making, even on

the Myanmar issue.

"Whatever views expressed about the Asean Charter, at the moment what we have decided is our joint agreement. We've had consensus at the ministerial level. We (leaders) accepted it.

"We can't make any exemption," he said, when asked about the lack of action provided in the charter to punish errant members.

For the prime minister, Asean should be seen in a larger picture — to enhance co-operation among members and to have greater integration in the region.

"We don't want to see that just because there is an issue with Myanmar, for example, the Asean Charter has to be put aside. This charter will bring more progress, development and integration to the region.

"This will give us economic strength to compete in the competitive world.

"With the integration and economic co-operation, the charter will empower Asean to move as a province," he told Malaysian journalists here.

Earlier, Abdullah attended the 4th Brunei-Indonesia-Malaysia-

Philippines East Asean Growth Area (BIMP-EAGA) summit and the 3rd Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) summit.

The prime minister said he was happy with the progress of projects under the growth regions and that they would help Malaysia and its neighbours to co-operate better towards achieving prosperity together.

While Asean is preparing to move forward economically, the United States had threatened the grouping with a no-deal on a possible free trade agreement with Asean.

US trade representative Susan Schwab said here that the credibility and reputation of Asean had been called into question because of the situation in Myanmar.

"Business as usual can't be business as usual," she said.

Asean had unanimously rejected the US Senate resolution on Friday asking the grouping to suspend Myanmar.

Asean members believe that Myanmar would have a better chance of reform by staying within the group.