

# Abdullah: Charter will be a boon for S-E Asia

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SINGAPORE: Despite pressure from the United States and European Union as well as human rights organisations over Myanmar's military rule, Asean leaders yesterday signed the historic Asean Charter that would bring the 10 regional member countries closer to a rules-based legal entity.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the charter would create a more integrated Asean to ensure competitiveness that would benefit about half a billion people in the Southeast Asian region.

"Asean will be seen as an entity that will enable more development projects as well as convincing Asean dialogue partners to foster closer co-operation. This will also ensure Asean will be a more stable region," he said here yesterday after signing the document that is expected to come into force when all member countries ratify it within a year.

For the past few days, there had been doubt about the consensus within Asean when Myanmar once again became the focus, in particular when the US and EU expressed unhappiness over Myanmar's slow process of democratisation.

On Monday night, Asean leaders took a few hours during their dinner meeting to decide whether United Nations special envoy Ibrahim Gambari should brief Asean's East Asia Summit with its dialogue partners.

Southeast Asian diplomacy prevailed when host Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong made an announcement 15 minutes before midnight that Gambari would not brief the Asean or EAS leaders, and that Myanmar would deal directly with the UN and the international community on its own.

After the Asean leaders put the summit back on track, they discussed various issues during their retreat yesterday and came out to sign the charter and other documents.

Abdullah said the charter and the Asean economic blueprint would enable Malaysia to participate in many projects in the region, and even without direct participation, it would be able to invest in viable projects.

"By being a rules-based entity, I believe Asean will find a better way to ensure success in economic programmes."

The charter stipulates that Asean member countries adhere to the rule of law, good governance, the principles of democracy and constitutional government, have respect for fundamental freedoms, promote and protect human rights and social justice.

Member countries will have to ensure peaceful settlement of disputes, non-interference in the internal affairs of member countries, and respect for the right of every member state to lead its national existence free from external interference, subversion and coercion.

It also establishes an Asean human rights body for the promotion and protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.

However, decision-making would be by consultation and consensus. This means that in the event of the ministers not reaching a decision by consensus, the matter would be brought up to the leaders.

It is then the prerogative of the leaders to decide how a decision can be made.

The summit will also now be held twice annually. According to sources, one is for the 10 Asean leaders only and the other, the Asean



Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi signing the Asean Charter in Singapore yesterday. — Bernama picture

leaders with their dialogue partners. At the moment, the annual summit combines both meetings.

The charter provides that:

- The Asean secretariat will be empowered with two additional deputy secretaries-general with the rank and status of deputy ministers;
- The establishment of a committee of permanent representatives to Asean in Jakarta to support the work of several Asean councils as well as take over most of the other agencies' functions to reduce Asean meetings which now number about 700 annually; and,
- The establishment of dispute settlement mechanisms in all fields of Asean co-operation. If a dispute arises which indirectly affects the member countries, the mechanism could be used to find a solution.

The "One Vision, One Identity, One Community" slogan at the 11th Asean summit in Kuala Lumpur in 2005 will be the Asean motto.

Besides the Asean charter, the leaders signed the economic blueprint with the goal of creating an Asean economic community by 2015 through having a single market and production base. It will have a free flow of goods, services, investments and skilled labour, and a freer flow

of capital, with equitable economic development and reduced poverty and socio-economic disparities.

The leaders also signed a declaration on climate change and the environment which among other things, agreed on better cooperation to tackle the haze caused by forest fires in Indonesia.

They also expressed support for the UN climate change conference to be held in Bali next month.