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# Pledge to strengthen cooperation

ASEAN ALLIANCE Military forces may be deployed for disaster relief operations

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**A**sean yesterday pledged to strengthen cooperation among the 10-member states grouping in facing natural disasters, including coordinating region-wide humanitarian assistance and disaster relief operations.

The grouping's leaders at the end of their summit here yesterday passed the Bali Declaration which among others touched on regional cooperation in disaster management, even as member states in Indochina, especially Thailand, are inundated by floods.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak told reporters here that yesterday's leaders meeting also touched on the need for increased awareness at all levels within

Asean of the damaging impact brought about by climate change. He said Asean was not exempted from the damaging effect of climate change.

The strengthened cooperation may also involve the region's military forces where cooperation will be enhanced in providing Asean-wide humanitarian and disaster relief operations in times of disaster.

Earlier, Najib earlier met Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra who apologised for not being able to visit Malaysia as earlier scheduled, given the critical flooding faced

by the capital, Bangkok. Yingluck told Najib that a new schedule was being worked on and she would probably visit Malaysia next month.

Asean leaders were also informed of the progress made in efforts to establish an Asean Economic Community by 2015.

"We have achieved a lot especially in the tariff-related issues but there are more to do in the non-tariff barriers as well as liberalisation of the region's services sector," he said.

*"The need for increased awareness of the damaging impact brought about by climate change."  
Datuk Seri Najib Razak*

Meanwhile, Asean leaders agreed in principle to admit Timor Leste as a new member to the grouping. Timor Leste's application will however have to go through the usual process where Asean will ensure its membership would bring benefits

both to the country and the group.

At the summit, Myanmar was chosen to chair Asean in 2014, a development that is likely to attract negative comments from the Western nations.

Najib said Myanmar's appointment was made after it showed progress in observations of human rights. The meeting yesterday, however, hoped that Myanmar would do more in bringing the country to full democracy.

On the United States' intention of establishing a military forward base in Darwin, Australia, he said while the development was purely a bilateral matter between Washington and Canberra, he hoped the presence of American forces just under 1,000km south of Indonesia would not create tension in the region.

He said the issue was not dis-

cussed yesterday, although several Asean governments, including Indonesia, had indicated uneasiness towards the presence of US military very close to the region.

Analysts have also said the move by Washington, seen to check China's growing might, in the economic and military fronts, also risk tearing Asean apart as some member-states were clearly supporting the move, especially those feeling threatened by Beijing in the overlapping claims currently made on atolls in the South China Sea.

Malaysia is one of the nations, apart from China, Vietnam and the Philippines, currently laying claims on the Spratlys.

President Barack Obama arrived here yesterday, for the first time that he will be attending the dialogue between Asean and its partners and he will have a bilateral meeting with Najib today.