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'Differences won't split Asean'

PM: We may differ slightly, but there is strong Asean solidarity

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LANGKAWI: Differences among Asean member countries on the South China Sea dispute will not split the regional grouping, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

Najib said the issue had instead shown strong unity within Asean to deal with the challenge collectively.

"No, it has not (split Asean), because I see that there is strong Asean unity and solidarity.

"We may differ slightly in our approaches but we are all on the same page when it comes to the main principles of how we deal with the question of the South China Sea," Najib told reporters here.

Najib said there were frank exchanges of views and concerns among member countries on the issue.

"However, Asean will continue to uphold the principles that we had enunciated."

He said disputes should be settled in an amicable, negotiated manner, and that all parties must adhere to international laws, specifically the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of The Sea.

Claimant countries should not do anything to increase tensions in the region, and must adhere fully to the 2002 Declaration on The Conduct of Parties in The South China Sea (DoC).

"We will continue to maintain our position vis-a-vis these stated principles which will guide us when we conduct our relations with China and the other powers in the region,"



Leading the way: Najib walking with Indonesian vice-president Jusuf Kalla (left) and Prime Minister of Thailand General Prayut Chan-O-Cha in Langkawi. - Bernama

said Najib.

Indonesian Foreign Minister Retno Marsudi who was earlier approached by reporters said that Asean had not failed to send its message to China on the dispute in the South China Sea.

"We'll continue sending the message about the importance of peace and stability in the region," she said, adding that Asean would further

intensify its engagement with China on the issue.

Meanwhile, the chairman's Statement of the 26th Asean Summit which was released yesterday said that the heads of Asean member countries shared the "serious concerns" expressed by some of the leaders on the land reclamation being undertaken in the South China Sea.

The statement said that land re-

clamation had eroded trust and confidence and might undermine peace, security and stability in the region and that Asean Foreign Ministers had therefore been instructed to urgently address the matter.

"While noting that progress has been made in the CoC, we urge consultations to be intensified, to ensure the expeditious establishment of an effective CoC," read the statement.