



Anwar and Philippine President Ferdinand Marcos Jr at the summit in Vientiane yesterday. -REUTERSPIC

Asean calls for early end to South China Sea issue

> Grouping reaffirms importance of maintaining peace, stability in disputed waters and urges swift drafting of code of conduct

VIENTIANE: At the 27th Asean-China Summit yesterday, Asean called for an early conclusion of the Code of Conduct (COC) in the South China Sea.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, who delivered the Asean common statement at the summit, said Asean reaffirmed the importance of maintaining peace and stability in the South China Sea.

"This is in accordance with the universally recognised principles of international law, including the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea 1982."

Malaysia served as the country coordinator for the Asean-China Summit, which was held as part of the 44th and 45th Asean Summits and Related Summits.

According to media reports, Asean member states and China are currently engaged in negotiations on the COC in the South China Sea, with the second reading of the negotiating text completed last year.

On a separate matter, Anwar said Asean and China have been each other's largest trading partners since 2020, with trade volume reaching US\$696.7 billion (RM2.99 trillion) in 2023.

He said Asean also welcomes China's support for energy transition efforts and collaboration in emerging technologies such as robotics and artificial intelligence.

Laos Prime Minister Sonexay Siphandone said Asean and China marked a significant milestone in their economic partnership at the summit with the announcement of the substantive conclusion of the "Asean-China Free Trade Area (ACFTA) 3.0 Upgrade" negotiations.

He said the development reflects deepening trade ties between the two sides, with China maintaining its position as Asean's largest trading partner for the past 15 years, while Asean has been its top trading partner for three consecutive years since 2020.

"Leaders from both sides adopted five key joint statements aimed at further enhancing cooperation," he said in his speech at the summit attended by Chinese Premier Li Qiang and all 10 Asean member countries.

The five key outcomes are combating telecommunication network fraud and online gambling, deepening people-to-people exchanges, promoting the development of smart agriculture, facilitating cooperation in building a sustainable and inclusive digital ecosystem as well as the substantial conclusion of the ACFTA 3.0 upgrade negotiations.

"The Asean-China partnership has significantly contributed to Asean community building efforts, as well as the common goal of maintaining and promoting peace, stability, and cooperation in the region."