

Asean spirit to prevail in sea spat

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PEACEFUL RESOLUTION: Group, China agree to work together to settle dispute

KOTA KINABALU: THE spirit of Asean will be upheld as member countries seek a path to peacefully resolve disputes in the South China Sea with China.

Asean has drafted a Code of Conduct on how to deal with the issue and is waiting to start discussions with China.

Foreign Affairs Minister Datuk Seri Anifah Aman said yesterday he believed that China was earnest in finding a peaceful solution to the disputes, just as how Asean wanted it.

He was speaking after a bilateral meeting with China's Foreign Minister Yang Jiechi, who arrived here on Saturday for a three-day official visit as part of his tour of Southeast Asian countries, including Indonesia and Brunei.

"We have close relations with China and both nations agree on continuous engagement," Anifah said, adding that Malaysia had made clear that there were other claimants to the resource-rich South China Sea.

"So, we need to settle this on our side first before going over to China and I believe they appreciate this and realise that it is the wish of Asean member countries.

"Malaysia had underscored that Asean and China should begin discussions on the Code of Conduct at the earliest opportunity."

Meanwhile, Yang said China firmly supported the Asean community.

"We agree to continue working together and accommodate each other's concerns and interests. We appreciate the efforts by Malaysia to push forward China-Asean relations."

On his first day in Sabah, Yang met Prime Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak and Sabah Chief Minister Datuk Seri Musa Aman after joining the breaking of fast in Kimanis, hosted by Anifah.

The move to formulate the Code of Conduct by member countries followed failed talks over the territorial claims during the 45th Asean Ministerial Meeting in Phnom Penh last month.

The conference had also ended without a joint statement for the first time in 45 years after they failed to reach a common ground on how to deal with the thorny issue.

Malaysia, Brunei, Vietnam and the Philippines have staked a claim to the resource-rich area.

In April, tension grew between China and the Philippines following a stand-off in Scarborough Shoal in South China Sea.

Naval ships from the Philippines confronted several Chinese fishing vessels, triggering a war of words and threats of economic retaliation.

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