

Closer Integration Spells Global Prowess For Asean – Najib

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By Muin Abdul Majid

KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 19 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak said today closer integration among the ASEAN member states will allow them to combine their strengths and compete more effectively on the global stage.

"In doing so, we will be able to deliver meaningful and positive change to the livelihood and well-being of the 622 million people who call this region home," said the Malaysian prime minister.

Betterments could be expected in many areas such as healthcare services and in terms of improved access to education, he said in a written response to questions posed by Bernama in conjunction with the 27th ASEAN Summit and Related Summits scheduled from Nov 18 to 22.

ASEAN leaders gathered in Kuala Lumpur for their annual summit are set to sign on Sunday a declaration marking the establishment of the ASEAN Community by year-end.

The '2015 Kuala Lumpur Declaration on the Establishment of the ASEAN Community' entails closer integration through three pillars - economy, political-security, and socio-culture.

The region's leaders are also scheduled to adopt the 'Kuala Lumpur Declaration on ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead Together' that lays out ASEAN's vision for the community in the next 10 years.

"These are very important agreements that will help further consolidate and strengthen ASEAN as we move towards ever greater cooperation," Najib said of the two documents to be issued under Malaysia's stewardship of the 10-member bloc of Southeast Asian nations.

The prime minister, who will be welcoming world leaders such as Chinese Premier Li Keqiang, United States President Barack Obama and Russian Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev, reckoned that 2015 had been a significant year for ASEAN.

Having had the privilege of chairing ASEAN this year, Najib said he could tell that there was a genuine desire for greater unity among member countries.

"And we are confident that we have set the community on the path to greater cooperation and cohesion," he said.

Premised on political stability, equitable economic development and social responsibility, Najib said the creation of the ASEAN Community was the culmination of a journey that started in 2007.

"It will mark the beginning of a new era that will see the transformation of ASEAN into one of the world's most competitive regions," he said.

Najib reckoned that the greatest challenge in creating the ASEAN Community was the fact that there were very few precedents for what the region hoped to achieve.

"This is an enormous project involving 10 member states, over 600 million people, and a combined economy with a GDP of more than US\$2.57 trillion," he said.

Najib anticipated that the key challenges to be faced would be ensuring that regional agreements were translated on the ground, ensuring effective coordination among member states and various stakeholders, and generating the resources to support the implementation of programmes and projects.

According to him, as part of the guidelines entrenched in the 'ASEAN 2025: Forging Ahead' document, a number of measures had been taken to pro-actively address such challenges.

"For instance, we've ensured there's a greater focus towards strengthening ASEAN's institutional capacity and effectiveness and placing special emphasis on promoting ASEAN presence and awareness at the national, regional and international levels," he said.

Another focus area is introducing more rigorous implementation, monitoring and review in the respective ASEAN Community Blueprints 2025.

"We are confident that these and other measures we've introduced will help us overcome any challenges we may face," Najib said.

On Obama's presence at the 3rd ASEAN-US Summit and the 10th East Asia Summit, Najib disclosed that the American president was expected to announce the new strategic partnership between the US and ASEAN.

"We welcome the president's efforts to deepen ties with ASEAN under the broader US policy of rebalancing to the Asia Pacific," Najib said.

He also spoke about the convening of the 18th ASEAN-China Summit and the expected presence of the Chinese premier at the 10th East Asia Summit in the Malaysian capital.

China, he said, had made clear its continued support for ASEAN's central role in the evolving regional architecture.

"And these will be opportunities to discuss ways we can further strengthen relations and talk about the maintenance of peace, security and stability in the region," Najib said.

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