

Australia not against EAEC if it complements Apec

By MARY ZACHARIAH

AUSTRALIA is not against the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) if it is complementary to the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec).

"We do not resist the evolution of the EAEC. If the EAEC concept does evolve, it should be as a caucus within Apec rather than as a separate process of its own," said visiting Australian Foreign Affairs Minister, Senator Gareth Evans.

Evans was responding to a question from the floor after presenting a paper on "The birth of an Asia Pacific com-

munity" at an Institute of Democracy and Foreign Relations forum in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

The EAEC, an Asean initiative, is meant to be a loose consultative forum to promote free trade and economic cooperation among East Asian countries. It is also meant to enable developing countries to discuss common problems and speak with one voice at international forums.

Later at a press conference, when asked if the more developed countries of Apec would come up with a plan to help its less developed members, Evans said:

"Apec has to be sensitive to the needs of the developing countries.

"Apec is a unique organisation in many ways because it comprises countries in various stages of development. It is important to remain sensitive to the needs of the less developed countries."

Asked about the Indian Ocean Rim Cooperation forum that Perth will host in June, he said:

"Our approach is to seek representation from all participating countries. At this initial stage, what we want to do is let some ideas bloom about how things might

evolve."

While Evans did not name the potential participants for the meeting, AFP quotes Australian officials as saying that Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia and the Gulf states are among those likely to attend.

The idea for an Indian Ocean trade and security grouping was first raised by South Africa, on which its Deputy President F.W. de Klerk had also brought up for discussion during his visit to Malaysia last week.

Evans said the Malaysian response to the proposal, from ministers and officials, has been one of genuine in-

terest.

"We see Malaysia as being a significant player in the evolution of the concept of Indian Ocean Rim Cooperation," he added.

Commenting on Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's invitation to Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating to visit Malaysia, Evans said: "Mr. Keating is very keen to accept the invitation and to build on the very good start that the two of them made in Bogor last November."

Dr Mahathir and Keating were in Indonesia for the

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Apec heads of government meeting.

However, he said a date could not be fixed yet because it will depend on when Australia holds its election. Australia is due to have an election by April or May next year.

Earlier in his address chaired by Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Badawi, Evans said two very important meetings occurred in the Asia Pacific region last year, together constituting what can be described at a watershed.

The first was the Apec leaders' meeting in Bogor, in

which the 18 heads of government committed themselves to achieving free and open trade and investment by the year 2020.

The other was the inaugural meeting in Bangkok in July of the Asean Regional Forum (ARF), bringing together for the first time the 18 major security players of the region including Russia and Vietnam to begin a dialogue aimed at creating a new cooperative security environment.

On Apec, he said since its inaugural meeting in Canberra in 1989, the forum had grown from a loose grouping

to one which now embraces a clear-cut trade facilitation agenda.

"True that much remains to be delivered... but the progress has been remarkable," he said.

He added that East Asia has become one of the powerhouses of global economic growth, rivalling the traditional economic centres of North America and Europe.

"Malaysia, of course, has been at the very forefront of this spectacular pattern of economic growth in the region with growth in excess of 8 per cent for the last seven years," he said.

Evans confident about quality of firm's bid

By MARY ZACHARIAH

VISITING Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans says he is confident about the quality of the bid that an Australian company has submitted for a contract to build offshore patrol boats for the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN).

Speaking to reporters after presenting a paper entitled "The birth of an Asia-Pacific community" at the Institute of Democracy and Foreign Relations in Kuala Lumpur, Evan said the Australian bid went further than just meeting design needs, competitiveness and pricing.

"In fact, we have also looked at significant local content, Malaysian industry involvement and technology transfer," said Evans.

He said it is too premature to make any other comments as the tenders for the contract to build six patrol boats for the RMN closed only on Friday.

AFP reports: The Australian company bidding for the contract to build patrol boats for Malaysia said yesterday it was not taking anything for granted despite encouraging signs from a senior Malaysian minister.

Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim at the weekend described Melbourne-based Transfield Shipbuilding as "one of the leading contenders" for the contract.

"They have come up with a very impressive submission," Anwar said in Kuala Lumpur on Saturday, adding: "It is a very, very competitive bid."

Transfield spokesman Pat Wilson said: "We are heartened by what we've heard, but we're not taking anything for granted."

"We face tough competition, and we've still got a lot of hard work to do."

Transfield, which is building 10 frigates for the Australian and New Zealand navies, is the only Australian company bidding for the Malaysian project.

The bid is based on an 80-metre patrol vessel designed jointly with the Royal Australian Navy, which is considering such a vessel to replace its Fremantle class boats.

Wilson said Transfield's next hurdle is to make the short list for the Malaysian contract, with a final decision possible by mid-year.