

# Evans: 1994 watershed year for Asia Pacific

By Tengku Sariffuddin

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. — The commitment made by Asia Pacific countries towards free trade and a new co-operative security climate in the region during their meetings last year has paved the way for the establishment of an Asia-Pacific community.

Australian Foreign Affairs Minister Senator Gareth Evans said today the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) leaders' summit in Indonesia and Asean Regional Forum (ARF) meeting in Bangkok had consolidated and put in place key institutional elements to form the community.

Describing 1994 as a watershed year for the region, he said these events can be seen as marking a transition from theory to reality the idea of an Asia-Pacific community.

He said the regional leaders had committed themselves to achieving free and open trade and investment by 2010 for industrialised countries and 2020 for other member countries.

The ARF meeting, meanwhile, had brought together 18 countries who are major security players in the region to begin multilateral dialogues aimed at creating a new co-operative security environment.

Evans said there has been a vast improvement in the region's stability and security with the threat of war between the region's states receding into the background.

He said, however, the



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shape of the region's community should not lead to the formation of, among others, a customs union and a single internal market as in Europe.

He said the high-level economic integration within the Apec countries and increasing trade and cross-investment links between Asean countries had brought the region together.

"There is also the phenomenon of convergence. The global reality is that countries of different backgrounds are developing with modern technology. This phenomenon is at least as alive and well in Asia Pacific as anywhere else in the globe," he said at a lecture on "The birth of an Asia-Pacific community" at the Institute of Diplomacy and Foreign Relations.

Guests included diplomats, representatives of the

local business community and Malaysia-Australia interests groups. Also present was Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

Evans said Australia was committed to the economic development and security of Asia Pacific since the country's future and destiny lies with the region.

Australia's interests would be served by maintaining and strengthening the Apec and ARF forums.

"In fact, I believe the interests of all nations in the region will be served not only through evolution of these institutions but by the emergence of a confident, articulate sense of membership of a common Asia Pacific community," he said.

Replying to questions from the audience later, Evans said Australia was not against Asean's proposal to establish the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) since it was to be part of the Apec framework.

He said Australia was concerned that Apec evolution would be affected by the other groupings as this could lead to division within countries in the region.

"We don't resist it (EAEC) but it should not inhibit Apec," he said.

Evans added that Apec's position as the main forum for economic co-operation should be maintained.

On the proposal by South Africa on Indian Ocean rim co-operation, Evans said the forum would be organised in Perth in June.

He said 37 countries situated along the Indian Ocean, including Malaysia, would be invited to discuss the proposal.