UN envoy Gambari may meet Asian leaders in S’pore

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UNITED Nations Special Envoy for Myanmar, Professor Ibrahim Gambari, will have the opportunity to meet Asian leaders in Singapore during the East Asia Summit (EAS) later this month, Foreign Minister George Yeo said.

“It will be very good for the leaders of Asia to listen to him directly and then to affirm their collective support for his good offices,” he told the media yesterday, adding that Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong had extended an invitation to Prof Gambari to address the EAS on Nov 21.

Singapore currently holds the chairmanship of Asean and along with the Asean Summit, the EAS and other meetings will be held in the Republic from Nov 19.

Mr Yeo was speaking after a wide-ranging dialogue with students of the Singapore Management University (SMU) on “Singapore’s Foray on the international scene”.

Prof Gambari’s recent six-day mission to Myanmar, which ended on Thursday, had resulted in “some progress” although not as much as some had hoped, Mr Yeo said.

The Nigerian envoy had gained more trust from the military junta and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, but some were expecting more from his visit.

Prof Gambari did not meet Myanmar’s military ruler Than Shwe, though he had been invited to visit the country again.

Ms Suu Kyi, on the other hand, met Prof Gambari in Yangon and released a statement through him, in which she expressed a readiness to cooperate with the military government.

Mr Yeo yesterday acknowledged that Myanmar would be among key issues to be taken up during the meetings in Singapore but emphasised that it would not hijack the agenda.

He said that the signing of the Asean Charter would be the most important issue, setting the region on a new course.

The Foreign Minister, in his address, had said that the Charter would integrate the region and bring more stability in Asia.

During a dialogue with students afterwards, Mr Yeo said that Singapore was currently riding on the crest of a wave of optimism about the future of Asia.

The Singapore success story had attracted much interest and it was being cited in places as far away as Libya and the Middle East. And with the changes in Asia, the Republic’s future was secure if it did not make a mistake.

“There is a sense of Asian renaissance bubbling away, new and exciting things are happening and though there are occasionally counter-currents like Myanmar, the future is full of promise,” he said.

About 60 SMU students had signed up for the dialogue organised by the SMU Social Science Society and the Punggol Community Club Youth Executive Committee.

The students—many of them Singaporeans—fired a range of questions during the 90-minute dialogue session.

Besides Myanmar, students also quizzed the minister on Singapore’s ties with Indonesia and Malaysia, investments in China, the possibility of more economic tie-ups with Latin America, the role of global institutions and the future of the Republic if other nations too became developed.

Dialogue topics

DURING the dialogue with students, Foreign Minister George Yeo was also asked about:

» The stalled extradition treaty and defence cooperation agreement with Indonesia

The extradition treaty and DCA issue has been temporarily shelved. The Indonesians say that the timing is not quite propitious right now to resolve both. We understand. We hope that it can be resolved sooner rather than later. That’s our position.

» Economic cooperation in Johor

Johor and Singapore are very close neighbours. The greater the connectivity between the two sides, the greater the economic opportunities. It will add to GDP, there will be more trade, more investment. It is good for Malaysia and it is good for Singapore. Malaysia has taken the initiative and to the extent there is opportunity for cooperation between the two sides, we are happy to be part of it.