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Southeast Asian Summit Leaders Call for Charter, Free-Trade Zone

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CEBU, Philippines -- Southeast Asian summit leaders agreed to write a charter to create a bloc similar to the European Union and establish a free-trade zone by 2015, according to a draft of their final statement obtained Friday.

The statement, to be issued after the summit concludes Sunday, also includes an agreement on counterterrorism and the protection of migrant workers -- both major issues in the region. It vows to create an "Asean Economic Community" with a free flow of goods, services, investment and capital by 2015.

"The future looks brighter for the region," Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo said in a statement Friday.

Implementing the goals will be difficult, however. The 10 countries in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations have long voiced support for a joint charter, but the process of writing one remains in its initial stages. Officials here say they see the declaration as a starting point for the charter, but have refused to speculate on when it might actually be completed.

One sticking point has been the proposal to allow member states to sanction others. This is seen as a means to influence the military junta ruling Myanmar, which has long lagged behind the rest of the region in its dismal human-rights record. Before the Asean summit this weekend, Asean foreign ministers expressed concern over Myanmar's slow progress toward democracy and urged the junta to release all political prisoners.


Terrorism is another major problem. According to the draft, the leaders agreed to share information and training to counter terrorism and crossborder crimes.

The Philippines was on high alert as leaders from across Southeast Asia arrived Friday for the summit, which was preceded by three bombings that killed seven people in the country's strife-torn south. Officials said they suspected terrorists, but denied any direct link to the summit.

More than 8,000 police and soldiers have been mobilized to secure the summit, which begins Saturday and is to be followed by a broader summit with Asean's Asian dialogue partners on Monday.

Some 200 protesters gathered here Friday, and police said some slipped past their cordons near

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the main media venue. Three demonstrators were arrested, but no further incidents were reported.

The other main points of the final document were the expansion of free and fair trade; a switch from fossil fuels to biofuels to enhance energy security; and the reduction of poverty to narrow the development gap.

On international issues, the Philippines offered to host the next round of the so-called "six-party" talks on the denuclearization of North Korea. No place or date for the talks has been decided.

The Asean leaders were also to call for the successful conclusion of the Doha round of the World Trade Organization talks, saying that success of the round "is crucial to the further strengthening of the multilateral trading system." The draft statement added that Asean welcomes Vietnam's joining the WTO, and supports the acceptance of Laos into the body as well.

The summit brings together the 10-member Association of Southeast Asian Nations and their dialogue partners -- Australia, China, Japan, India, South Korea and New Zealand. On the sidelines of the talks, South Korean Foreign Minister Song Min Soon called for more cooperation between his country, China and Japan, whose ties have been strained by territorial disputes and visits by Japanese leaders to a Tokyo war shrine many see as a symbol of its pre-1945 militarism. Mr. Song also said progress must be made soon to resolve the nuclear standoff with North Korea.

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