

IT WAS ANYTHING BUT— BORING

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THE Third Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting (Chogrm) — which has just ended — in Suva, Fiji, was anything but boring.

The somnolence of the South Seas did not lull the 17 leaders from the Asia-Pacific region into mouthing mere niceties and platitudes. They spent four days in earnest discussions — multilaterally and bilaterally.

The 100 members of the Press corps gathered at placid Suva and Pacific Harbour — venues of the discussions — found a wealth of material to file.

While Singapore Premier Lee Kuan Yew was the doyen of the gathering, this was the first Commonwealth meeting for the Malaysian leader, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

It was also the first time for the Maldives President, Mr Maumoon Abdul Gayoom, whose country joined the Commonwealth this year after 17 years of independence.

Being a newcomer and having a reputation for being forthright (particularly with regard to his view that the Commonwealth is languishing and that its

One of the preoccupations of the Press covering the Summit was to ask the leaders on the usefulness of Chogrm. They would not spare Dr Mahathir, particularly because of his critical view about the value of the Commonwealth.

Asked a reporter: "You described last year's Chogrm (Commonwealth Summit) in Melbourne as a talkshop. What made you change your mind about this particular meeting?"

Replied Dr Mahathir: "That was a different meeting. That was a much bigger participation and I hate crowds. I find that I can't get myself through when there is a big crowd. (Deadpan). Everybody is looking at everybody else and not looking at me at all." (General laughter.)

There was no dearth of copy for the Australian and the New Zealand journalists as their Prime Ministers carried on their "simmering feud".

Controversy

Mr Muldoon, critical of Chogrm when it was set up in 1978 (probably because it was initiated by Mr Fraser and is basically an Australian-sponsored affair), has remained critical.

A New Zealand journalist described Chogrm as a

summits are not beneficial), Dr Mahathir inevitably attracted a lot of attention.

Although the Malaysian leader was modest about his performance — "We played a normal role" — it was obvious from the remarks emanating from the conference that he had made quite an impact.

"What we proposed had been accepted. But to say that we played a dominant role, I think we are patting ourselves on our back," said Dr Mahathir in response to a question at a Press conference.

Remarked one delegate at a reception: "Dr Mahathir talks sense. He projects the image that he is a realistic fellow."

"He is one leader who does not speak at every turn. If he finds he has something to say, then only will he intervene. Ninety-nine per cent of his interventions are on economic issues," said another delegate.

Reputation

Commented yet another participant: "The Malaysian leader gets an attentive audience. He comes with some reputation, that is the reason."

Said a political writer from New Zealand: "Dr Mahathir is refreshing. His rationale against a global conference to restructure the world's financial system (proposed by New Zealand Premier Robert Muldoon) has never been put in that way before."

A conference source said that Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser and the South Pacific island nations were happy that Dr Mahathir also spoke out on their behalf in his hitting out at the "exploitative activities" of developed nations and the work ethic of their workers.

Both Mr Fraser and the Fijian host have strong trade unions at home. At that time in Australia, Qantas flights were affected by some stoppage of work by the staff in protest against a move to cut down cabin crew.

In Fiji, hotel staff deferred their strike because of the Summit.

Dr Mahathir's informality — "he has no airs, is approachable — and his sense of humour made him a favourite with the Press.

But the opportunity of an "exclusive" with Dr Mahathir for Radio Australia journalist Richard Andrews was dashed when his equipment failed him.

Later in passing, Dr Mahathir briefly related his experience to the Malaysian Press.

A disappointed Richard said later it was most embarrassing for him.

"baby of Mr Fraser, born under protest from Mr Muldoon" who again criticised the gathering as a waste of time.

A reporter tried in vain to draw Dr Mahathir into the controversy. When he asked the Prime Minister for his view on Mr Muldoon's remark that "at a conference like this you probably get a suntan, have a great swim and that a conference like this is useless", Dr Mahathir replied smilingly:

"I am not going to get into any conflict with Mr Muldoon. That is his view..."

At this conference Mr Muldoon found someone who shared his view. The Solomon Islands leader was quoted as having said the meeting was a waste of time and boring.

"It was a good public relations exercise for Fiji, Australia and New Zealand," said the Foreign Affairs and International Trade Minister, Mr Dennis Lulei.

As far as the usefulness of Chogrm was concerned, the remarks by the two leaders were voices in the wilderness.

The host, Fijian Prime Minister Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, retorted that such a comment was "boring" for it was heard before.

Winding up the five-day Summit, the Fiji leader said: "I find that there are 10 projects under way at the Solomons — copra oil extraction, laundry soap, soft drinks, sheet metal... That is done in the last two years since the last Chogrm. I do not know what they are asking for."

Dr Mahathir had this to say: "I don't know, they were there all the time. I think I am correct in saying that when we sat down to endorse the communique, he

(Solomons leader) said he agreed with the content. He did participate in the debate..."

Mr Fraser said one of the real benefits of Chogrm "is that it provides a forum for small island States in a way which enables their voices to be heard, their opinions expressed and given weight to. That most likely does not happen in any other international conference."

Premier Lee of Singapore said it was refreshing to meet informally and to listen to the views of others. In other gatherings it would have been inhibited.

He found the Pacific Islanders, including the Maldives, very realistic. Their leaders were down to earth, concerned with their immediate problems to try to make life easier for their peoples.

Father Walter Lini of Vanuatu (independent in 1980 with a 117,000 population) said the meeting was "not dominated" by a small number of countries as was so in the past. "This time it was full of a sense of co-operation and understanding."

That the small island nations really spoke their minds and lucidly, too, was demonstrated by the Maldives leader.

President Maumoon revealed at a closed-door session that in 1977, the Russians offered his country \$1 million to lease the former British military base on the island of Gan.

"It could have built 20 primary schools (the Maldives then had only three), five regional hospitals (they had only one then), and so on. But I argued (he was then Transport Minister) that we would jeopardise our position as a non-aligned country and that we would alienate ourselves from the Islamic world," he said.

(The 160,000 people in the Maldives — a group of 1,200 islands, south-west of Sri Lanka — are Sunni Muslims.)

The President then spoke of the tariff barriers put up by the United States against garments manufactured by the Maldives' budding industry.

It was a very difficult situation to be in — and perhaps their problems, that of small fragile economies — were not totally understood by countries like the US, he said.

While the absence of Soviet bases contributed to stability in the South Pacific region, some of the small island nations did stress the pressures they were working under.

They were also being wooed by the Russians. They have so far held out against co-operating with them.

"But I think they can hold out for so long. There may be a time when they just have to accept the fact that they are not getting anything from the US. Therefore they may have to co-operate with the Russians," said Dr Mahathir.

"They agree on the need to be close to the US, be friendly and to wish the US well, but they feel that it is not being reciprocated."

Economic issues, including practical regional co-operation, dominated the discussions. Dr Mahathir said the leaders were pessimistic about the global situation because they had reason to be so.

"At the moment I don't see any solution. The only solution I see is of course if they can bring down the interest rates, which is killing international trade."

It is difficult to keep track of the number of Press conferences held by Mr Muldoon and Mr Fraser and the favourite topic was New Zealand's monetary reform initiatives to overcome what Wellington described as the "political logjam on the trade and payments front."

Since Mr Fraser spoke against the proposal in the closed-door discussion, the New Zealanders appeared to blame him for preventing unanimity on the subject.

According to them, Mr Fraser took a bullish line. He showed fundamental disagreement with Mr Muldoon's analysis of the causes of the continuing monetary crisis.

Where Mr Muldoon blames the sometimes harsh conditions set by the IMF on loans for driving poor countries to international banks, Mr Fraser blamed "national imprudence", saying some countries had simply over-borrowed.

Later when asked at a Press conference if he was critical of Mr Muldoon's proposal, Mr Fraser said he was not hostile to it but was just pointing out some of the consequences relating to it.

He had simply pointed out that the Commonwealth Finance Ministers had set up a wide-ranging review.

Message

"Once that is available we will be in a much better position to judge what the next step ought to be..."

Mr Fraser also said he would not like to see the pressure for global negotiations of the North-South dialogue to be weakened by pressure for other forms of negotiations.

Mr Muldoon, apparently, must have his last say. The New Zealand leader (a cost accountant) accused Mr Fraser (who has a Master's degree in philosophy, politics and economics) as being ignorant of the international banking system.

"He is not a Finance Minister. It's not his field." Mr Muldoon said he was finding it more difficult to get his message across at Chogrm than in the Commonwealth Finance Ministers' meeting in London.

The Commonwealth Secretariat's economic chief, Dr B. Persaud, said: "The decision seems to be going this way — let the Commonwealth group do the study and that will point out whether you need a separate world economic conference."

Meanwhile, Mr Muldoon will move on his own initiative to gain more support for his proposal. He will contact Britain's Margaret Thatcher and Canada's Pierre Trudeau.

The drafting committee spent hours haggling over the words "welcome" and "noted with appreciation" for that particular proposal. It settled for the latter and both Mr Fraser and Mr Muldoon can claim that their views prevailed.

The relevant section of the communique reads: "Without prejudice to global negotiations, but mindful of the emergency facing the world economy, heads of government noted with appreciation the New Zealand proposal for a review of the Bretton Woods system."

"Acknowledging the need for an appropriate review and for reform of the world's trading and payments arrangements on lines responsive to contemporary needs and realities, they agreed that their governments would give particular attention to it in the light of the study Commonwealth Finance Ministers had commissioned from the Commonwealth Secretariat."

The next Chogrm will be held in Papua New Guinea in 1984.