

Apec being turned into trade bloc, says Dr Mahathir

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From Tony Francis

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN, Tues. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said an Australian proposal to change the name of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) to the Asian-Pacific Economic Community only confirmed Malaysia's worst fears that the group would be turned into a trade bloc.

The Prime Minister said Apec was gradually resembling a trade bloc with the setting up of a secretariat in Singapore.

Australia's Foreign Minister Gareth Evans suggested at the weekend that Apec change its name to reflect a "sense of togetherness" now evident in the 15-nation forum.

Dr Mahathir said at a Press conference at the end of his three-day official visit to Brunei that Apec was formed supposedly to undertake projects to be participated by developing countries so that they could upgrade their capability.

He said: "This was why Malaysia became a member even though we had earlier been worried that it would be a formal body which would benefit only certain economically strong countries.

"We were worried that Apec would be manipulated by the big powers. Today, it has been proven that it is in fact being manipulated.

"When it was formed,

there was no mention of a secretariat. Now there is one. Now they are also talking of a summit meeting.

"It is now quite clear what their intention was from the start — to have a trade grouping for the interest of the economically strong countries and not the weaker ones."

Asked whether Malaysia will withdraw from Apec, Dr Mahathir said it would not but its participation would only be at the level as agreed upon when it was formed in 1989.

Asked whether he has changed his mind about not attending the proposed Summit of Apec Heads of State in Seattle in November, Dr Mahathir said his decision was firm.

"I would have been happy to attend if the proposal for the summit had come from Apec itself . . . after the proposal had been debated and agreed upon by member countries.

"But when only one nation decides that we should have a summit and then everybody goes along and have a summit, then I think this is most undemocratic . . ." said Dr Mahathir.

US President Bill Clinton made the summit proposal when he attended the Group of Seven meeting in Tokyo last month.

Apec, mooted by Australia, comprises 15 countries, namely the Asean six, the US, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, South Korea, China, Taiwan and Hong Kong.