

KL 'no' to free trade area proposal

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From Tony Francis
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LIMASSOL (Cyprus), Fri. — Malaysia is opposed to the move to turn the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum into an Asia-Pacific Economic Community, like the European Community.

"There is a proposal that Apec be made a free trade area like the EC," Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told journalists after a 45-minute closed-door meeting with his Singapore counterpart, Mr Goh Chok Tong.

Dr Mahathir had earlier received Goh in his suite at the Le Meridien Hotel, the conference centre.

"My view is that Apec must first cover all countries in the Pacific Rim, including Chile, Ecuador and Peru, and not be confined to a limited number of countries or issues.

"Also, I think it is premature to start thinking of Apec as a free trade area. What are the implications? We need to know what kind of effects it will have before we can think of it in those terms," he said.

The Group of Eminent Persons within Apec was said to have proposed that the group be turned into a "free trade area" like the EC.

not made their stand clear on the EAEC, did so.

Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating, who was scheduled to meet Dr Mahathir this evening, is also expected to raise the Apec issue. The Australian media is speculating that Keating will try to persuade Dr Mahathir to go to Seattle for the inaugural summit. Apec was mooted by Australia to promote trade and economic co-operation among selected countries in the Pacific Rim.

Meanwhile, commenting on the Cyprus issue, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia's stand was well-known and consistent.

"From the start, we have said that we will go along with the UN in that Cyprus should not be divided into two. This is because Cyprus is a single country and not two. But this will have to be resolved through negotiations between the Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots," he said.

The island's only English daily — the *Cyprus Mail* — had criticised Dr Mahathir for not making any reference to the Cyprus issue in his address at the opening of the summit yesterday.

Dr Mahathir said he felt there was no need to do so because Malaysia's stand on the issue had been clear and consistent from the start.

Nonetheless, Dr Mahathir's

Dr Mahathir said, during the meeting with Goh, he was asked about Malaysia's assessment of the situation regarding Apec, Asean and the East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC).

The Prime Minister said he told Goh that he would not attend the Apec summit in Seattle proposed by US President Bill Clinton for next month.

"Now there is talk about having an Apec summit every three years. I said I will not go," he added.

Asked whether he might change his mind later, Dr Mahathir said his decision had to do with the EAEC.

"The US, under Clinton's administration, does not seem to oppose (the EAEC) as vehemently as the US under President (George) Bush. But still, there is no clear stand by the US on the EAEC," he said.

Dr Mahathir, when in New York for the United Nations General Assembly earlier this month, had said that he would only go to the Apec summit in Seattle if those within Apec who had

ir's remarks on the Bosnian issue yesterday seemed to be well-received. British Foreign Secretary Douglas Hurd, who met Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi today, said Britain was "very familiar" with Dr Mahathir's stand on Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Although none of the six other leaders who spoke at the opening of the summit yesterday mentioned Bosnia in their speeches, the closed-door session of the Heads of Government today heard British Prime Minister John Major, Sultan Hassanah Bolkiah of Brunei and Bangladesh Prime Minister Begum Khaleda Zia address the issue.

Abdullah said Malaysia's view that the Commonwealth must not turn a blind eye on Bosnia simply because it was not a "Commonwealth affair" was echoed by the leaders. Brunei, in particular, came across very strongly on the issue, slamming the major powers for being powerless to do anything to stop the Bosnian tragedy.