

Australia tries to soothe Dr M

SYDNEY, Tues. — Australian Foreign Minister Gareth Evans tried today to heal any bruised sensitivities in Kuala Lumpur after Prime Minister Paul Keating tagged Malaysian leader Dr Mahathir Mohamad "a recalcitrant".

Evans said he was certain Dr Mahathir would understand the context of Keating's remarks made in Seattle yesterday, adding that he had not after all shirked the occasional "vigorous statement" himself, particularly when provoked by the media.

Keating, speaking to newsmen covering the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec) group summit, said he was sick of hearing about the Malaysian Prime Minister's refusal to attend the summit.

"Please don't ask me any more questions about Dr Mahathir," said Keating. "I wouldn't care less, frankly, whether he comes or not."

Asked whether he intended to see Dr Mahathir next year as had been arranged, he replied: "Yes I'll see him in his own right."

"But Apec is bigger than all of us — Australia, the US, Malaysia and Dr Mahathir (and) other recalcitrants".

Mahathir was the only one of the 15 Apec leaders to decline US President Bill Clinton's invitation to attend the summit to discuss Keating's plan to expand the forum into a free-trade community.

Keating's remarks, which

were headline news here today, have already earned him sharp criticism from Asia watchers and the media, with one paper, *The Australian*, describing them as "idiotically gratuitous" and "fantastically stupid" in a page one comment.

One of Keating's sternest

political critics, West Australia's conservative Premier Richard Court, said the remark represented foreign diplomacy at its worst and accused Keating of "bullying tactics".

In a statement issued in Perth, Court said his government totally disassociat-

ed itself from Keating's comment, which he said could only be described as "politically stupid".

"Malaysia is a highly-respected country within Asia and quite capable of handling its own trade negotiations without Keating's interference or bullying tactics," he said.

But Evans added: "I believe Dr Mahathir will understand the context in which Keating's remarks were made."

"He hasn't, after all, shirked from making the occasional vigorous statement himself, particularly when provoked to do so by media interrogation."

"It is the case that it's disappointing that Dr Mahathir chose not to attend this particular conference, but he did have his own reasons for doing so."

"I don't think we ought to overplay the whole question of attendance or non-attendance or remarks made about it. Certainly that should not be allowed to undermine the significance of what really has been a supremely important occasion for the region, and for world trade."

Evans said it was also important not to undervalue Malaysia's contribution to Apec.

Although it did not attend the leaders' meeting, Malaysia had been a very "useful contributor" to Apec committees, working groups and ministerial meetings, Evans said. — AFP

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