

I don't blame Clinton for his absence, says Dr M

From Zainul Arifin
in Osaka, Japan

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he did not blame US President Bill Clinton for staying away from the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation leaders' meeting today so that he could attend to domestic problems. Clinton, who is now deadlocked with the US Congress over the country's budget, will be represented by Vice-President Al Gore at the meeting.

"I think Clinton has a serious problem at home, now (the budget problem) has gone on. The government has to shut down and 800,000 (workers) now are not paid. I think that is the most important thing that stopped him from attending," he told Malaysian reporters yesterday.

Dr Mahathir arrived on Friday to attend the leaders' meeting and to have several bilateral meetings with other Apec leaders.

He dismissed suggestions that Clinton's no-show was because the US could not get what it wanted from the Apec meeting, that is, commitment from other countries to liberalise their markets by the 2010 deadline for industrialised economies and 2020 for the developing nations.

The Osaka meeting, on the other hand, will stress that while members strive for trade and investment liberalisation, they will not be bound by any date. Nevertheless, Dr Mahathir said, the US's commitment could be questioned if its leaders continued to miss Apec meetings.

"It is quite different from sending their Secretary of State or Commerce Secretary as they do not have the same clout as the chief executive."

The leaders' meeting was started by Clinton himself in 1993 when he invited economic leaders from Apec economies for an informal get-together at Blake Island, Washington. Last year the



ASIA-PACIFIC ECONOMIC COOPERATION
OSAKA 1995

leaders had another meeting in Bogor, Indonesia. Dr Mahathir, who was present in Bogor, was absent in Washington. Nevertheless, Dr Mahathir took a swipe at the country's critics saying that if such budgetary problems were to happen in Malaysia, the Government would be heavily criticised.

"In Malaysia, if this happens they will say that you are quite unable to rule your own country, that you have no capability.

"But of course this happens in America and it does not mean anything... the fact that they owed trillions of dollars also does not mean anything," he said, referring to the huge US national debt situation.

Dr Mahathir also said there was no discussion on the proposed East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC) during his meeting with Japanese Prime Minister Tomiichi Murayama yesterday.

Asked whether the time is now right for EAEC, with Apec going on well, he said: "The time has always been right, but some people may not want to recognise it."

The EAEC is aimed at bringing together East Asian nations so that they could consult each other on trade and economic matters. Asean, which is proposing the move, will be joined by others in the region such as Japan, South Korea and China.

Japan in deference to the US, which is against EAEC, has constantly expressed reservations about the caucus.

"Surely we will do it, we are not giving up. We don't see any harm in it.

"It is not like Nafta (North American Free Trade Agreement) which is a trad-

ing bloc...or even Afta (Asean Free Trade Area). EAEC is a consultative forum."

Dr Mahathir said he could not understand why there are countries that wanted to deny East Asian nations the right to try.

"Where is the equality, democracy, freedom and all that. A lot of people talk about them, but when they find that it is not in their interest, they could not care less (about such rights).

"This is the problem with the world today; people say we must have democracy, but when we point to areas where they are not practising democracy, such as in the United Nations, then they say that it is different."

On rumours that the current president of Japan's Liberal Democratic Party, a member of the coalition Government, is not that averse to the idea of EAEC, he said:

"We will have to see, I am not predicting anything...the proof of the pudding is in the eating."

The LDP president and the current Deputy Prime Minister, as well as International Trade and Industry Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto, is tipped to succeed Murayama as the country's next Premier.

On the possible membership of New Zealand and Australia in the EAEC, Dr Mahathir said the countries would not be considered until they are more Asian in their attitude.

"I know they are making every effort to Asianise themselves, but not just yet. Asia is not a question of ethnicity...it is also a question of culture.

"Asians don't go around telling other people, 'Look, you are not democratic enough, and you must do what I tell you.'

"That's not our culture. We want to see the kind of culture that shows respect to other people, of not having double standards. If they achieve that, then we are ready (to include them in the EAEC).