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Apec-Preparation

DELEGATES BEGIN ARRIVING IN MANILA FOR APEC MEETING

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MANILA, Nov 18 (Bernama) -- With only days to go before the opening of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum, delegates have begun to trickle in as the Philippines shifts into high gear in its preparations for the 18-nation meeting.

Manila's hotels are reportedly fully booked not only by delegates but also by the more than 2,000 journalists expected to cover the event.

"I'm still trying to get rooms for my delegation," laments an embassy official of one of Apec's weaker economies when met at a hotel near the Philippines International Convention Centre (PICC) here.

The PICC, situated off the picturesque Manila Bay, is the venue for the senior officials and ministerial meetings which begin tomorrow in the run-up to the Apec summit in Subic Bay on Nov 25. Subic Bay is a former American naval base north of here.

Workers could be still be seen sprucing up the capital, with flower pots springing up and street markers given a new coat of paint while the PICC itself is being embellished with colourful plants, banners and other decorations.

Apec banners hung along the streets and boulevards are now competing with the many sparkling decorations put up for Christmas.

One Filipino said: "In the Philippines, we start decorating for Christmas early."

Apec News Bureau director Victor Tuason said nearly 300 volunteers would be manning the media centre set up at the PICC.

Security is understandably tight with the expected presence of Apec leaders including American President Bill Clinton, President Suharto of Indonesia, Chinese President Jiang Zemin, Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien and Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Army personnel could be seen combing key meeting sites with bomb detectors while local newspapers today reported that the Philippine government has acquired bullet-proof limousines for the use of the leaders.

Philippine President Fidel Ramos last night said on television that the summit organisers and other agencies concerned were prepared to deal with any anti-Apec activities.

Meanwhile, Malaysian officials from the Ministry of International Trade and Industry and Ministry of Foreign Affairs are already in town to lay the groundwork for the senior officials and ministerial meetings.

At ministerial level, Malaysia will be represented by International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz and Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. -- BERNAMA

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