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Apec-Mahathir
PM HAILS MANILA SUMMIT AS SUCCESSFUL

By: Yong Soo Heong

SUBIC BAY, Nov 25 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has hailed the Manila Summit of the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) as a success.

Speaking at a news conference today after he had held meetings with 17 other leaders of Apec, he said he did not know whether to describe the success as "mild, hysterical or whatever" but the leaders were able to discuss issues that were of interest to the members.

Dr Mahathir said: "We had no problems in formulating something that is acceptable to everyone. In that sense, it is a success.

"At least we did not come away from the summit feeling disappointed or angry with each other."

The Apec summit was held after several days of consultations between senior officials and ministers of the member countries in Manila.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was satisfied with the revised version of the Manila Action Plan for Apec (Mapa) which included a paragraph that called for the conclusion of an information technology agreement (ITA) by the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) ministerial conference in Singapore next month.

The paragraph stated that in view of the importance of information technology in the 21st century, the Apec leaders called for the formulation of the ITA by the WTO meeting which would lead to substantially eliminating tariffs by the year 2000 but with a recognition for the need for flexibility as negotiations in Geneva proceeded.

Dr Mahathir said given that the clause was not binding, it depended on the ability of the countries concerned to open up their markets.

Earlier, there were concerns that Malaysia had compromised on the issue following the issuance of the Mapa declaration today as the country had been very vocal against coercion to find a consensus.

The US-initiated ITA had called for zero tariffs on all IT products and services by the year 2000.

However, the prime minister cleared the air by saying that the wording of the declaration provided for the flexibility that if Malaysia was not ready to open up its market, it would not submit to the ITA.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had insisted that it could accept the 2000 deadline but "we feel there must be flexibility and that has been written in the statement".

Asked whether he had discussed the ITA with US President Bill Clinton at their meeting last night, he said they did not particularly discuss the issue.

He explained: "What happened was that the revised draft of the statement was provided for us after dinner last night and our (International Trade and Industry) minister (Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz) had discussed the revised draft.

"Rafidah was actually instrumental in revising the particular paragraph (pertaining to the ITA). She indicated to me that we can live with it and because of that, I didn't see the need to discuss the matter."

He added that if the US wanted to reduce its tariff to zero, it was all right with Malaysia.

"Anyone who wants to reduce their tariffs to zero or minus zero, it is okay by us. If Malaysia is ready, it will do so. If we are not ready, we will not do it," he stressed.

On IAPs, he said they were dependent on the countries themselves in making offers and doing certain things that would comply with the requirements of Apec.

On Malaysia's market opening measures and investment regime, he said it had constantly reviewed its investment incentives since 1986 and there were now plenty of foreign investors in the country.

Malaysia's economic development had also attracted about one million legal and illegal workers in the country and as a result the country was shifting towards hi-tech and capital-industries from labour-intensive ones.

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