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All set for the fifth meeting of Apec leaders

Zainul Arifin in Vancouver

IT is close to the time of the year again when leaders of countries in the Asia Pacific meet to discuss, among others, trade and investment in the region.

The meeting next week will be the fifth for the heads of government since Trade and Foreign Ministers from 12 countries in the region met in Australia eight years ago.

Since then, the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation forum has grown, not only in size, but also in scope.

Year after year, the meetings got deeper and broader. Apart from the pursuit of trade and investment liberalisation and facilitation, the forum now has on its plate a variety of subjects, including technical co-operation, human resource development and the environment.

There are now rumblings in the background that issues such as human rights and security should be included as well. Some member countries have been calling for them, but thus far, many more would like to keep things in focus and not try to make Apec a cure all for all ills.

This is to be expected in a grouping of countries with varied economic, political and social outlooks.

This year's meeting will continue with the work of previous summits. It will seek to reaffirm past commitments and, at the same time, strengthen them further by making new ones. This is the very principle of Apec; where liberalisation comes gradually and not force by some onto others.

The other main principle of Apec is that all actions by member nations are voluntary and on the "best endeavour basis".

This is because while free trade is an ideal pursuits, Apec is an eclectic grouping that places a superpower, the United States, on the same footing with small developing nations.

Apec currently groups Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and the United States. Following the handover to China, Hong Kong will be known as "Hong Kong, China" at this year's meeting.

All Apec meetings from 1994 onwards have been working on a commitment made in 1994 by heads of government when they met in Indonesia.

The meeting came out with the Bogor Declaration, which said member economies would try their best to establish free trade in the Asia Pacific region. Developed economies are to liberalise completely by 2005, and developing members by 2020.

In Osaka in 1995 and in Manila last year, member economies committed their own individual plans to further the cause of Bogor. Each came to the meetings bearing promises of tariff cuts or elimination, at rates and levels they are comfortable with.

Also emphasised at the two meetings was the commitment for economic and technical co-operation among members to help boost the lot of the weaker economies.

This year's meeting will definitely try to build on that and more.

Among issues being bandied about is the involvement of the private sector in hastening the liberalisation and facilitation process.

A collective action plan, rather than each economy's individual plans, is being pushed for this meeting to further the cause of freer regional trade.

Before the 1993 meeting in Blake Island, the United States, Apec meetings were limited to Trade and Economic Ministers.

But President Bill Clinton extended it to the heads of government to give the extra push needed then to promote trade liberalisation. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad skipped the meeting then.

The idea of Apec itself has caught on, with many countries already lining at its door for entry into the grouping.

By last count, more than 10 countries, including Russia and India, have expressed interest, arguing that the Pacific Ocean, whose brim defines the grouping now, is merely a physical limitation that should not stand in the way of a larger Apec.

The interest by many is understandable. There is a fear among non-members that with Apec economies hastening liberalisation, they could be left out of a good thing.

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