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BUSINESSES TO GET PRIORITY AT APEC '97 IN VANCOUVER

Special Report

By: Salmly Hashim

WASHINGTON, March 15 (Bernama) -- Business leaders will play a bigger role this year in shaping the future of trade and investment in the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum.

As 1997 Apec host and chair, Canada is planning to strengthen the dialogue between the business community and governments in the Asia Pacific region, solidifying Apec's commitment to make the region an easier place to do business.

An APEC CEO Summit -- only 200 captains of industries from the 18 member-economies will be invited -- will be held in Vancouver, Nov. 22 and 23, on the eve of the Apec Leaders Summit.

A Canadian official here said, "We want to make Apec more relevant to the business community."

Deputy Head of Mission, Douglas Waddell, at a recent conference organised by the Pacific Basin Economic Council (PBEC) here, said "We continually say that 'Apec Means Business' and we want to make sure that business priorities are clear to ministers and officials charged with advancing the Apec process."

Canada will host five ministerial meetings this year -- trade, transportation, environment, energy and small and medium-sized enterprises (SME's).

Each meeting will have a business forum where senior business executives from around the region can meet to discuss their concerns and their priorities for trade liberalisation and facilitation, and tell ministers their views in a joint session, Waddell said.

Canada, which will also chair the Apec Business Advisory Council (ABAC) in Vancouver, also wants to engage ABAC members in the Apec process -- "to provide advice, they have to know what we're doing and why," he added.

"We are talking to ABAC about regular reporting to and from senior officials, close collaboration on developing responses to the ABAC recommendations, and involvement in the business aspects of ministerial meetings," Waddell said.

Canada as host will also ask members to focus on two areas of priority - to maintain the momentum of the trade and investment agenda and trade facilitation.

The Individual Action Plans, tabled in Manila, would be further examined in Vancouver to meet the Bogor targets of free and open trade and investment in the region by 2010/2020.

"These plans are 'living documents,' and it is only with constant attention and improvement that they will prove their usefulness," said Waddell who added that the rolling nature of the plans captures the sense of momentum towards more open markets and reduced barriers to economic activity.

But Waddell assured Apec members that a final "report card" would not be issued in Vancouver to assess and compare the progress of the individual plans.

However, members had agreed in Manila that an intensive process of consultation and exchanges on one another's plans would enable member economies to make improvements to ensure that all are on track to meet the Bogor goals.

The Canadians are also hoping to reduce the cost of doing business in the region through trade facilitation.

Recommended measures include harmonising and modernising procedures at ports, reducing product approval costs by aligning domestic and international standards, better protection of intellectual property rights, and improving transparency of government procurement regimes.

Canada is also expected to look into the question of expanding the Apec membership as the freeze on membership will be lifted this year.

Eleven economies have already submitted their applications, but only a "limited number" is expected to be admitted as new members.

It is also not clear at this point if Myanmar, Laos and Cambodia -- expected to be admitted as new members of Asean in Kuala Lumpur this year -- would automatically be admitted as new members of Apec.

"You're asking me to look into the crystal ball," a Canadian official said when asked at a briefing on Apec.

When asked if Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad would keep up the momentum built by Canada at the 1998 Apec meeting in Kuala Lumpur, the official said, "Malaysia has been active and enthusiastic, but it is quite evident that we can't predict what Dr. Mahathir will do." -- BERNAMA

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