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Malaysia to host expanded forum next year

MALAYSIA will host an expanded Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum next year, as the group had on Tuesday agreed to extend membership to three new economies.

Apec leaders meeting here agreed that Vietnam, Peru and Russia would boost the grouping to 21-member economies starting next year, and that their leaders would be invited to Kuala Lumpur for the annual get-together scheduled for Nov 17 and 18.

At the same time, to make sure that Apec does not become too unwieldy, a 10-year moratorium has been placed on new memberships, despite many economies knocking on its door. Apec was formed in 1989 with 12 members.

"It is much easier for 21 people to sit around the table than 50 or 100," Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told reporters here on Tuesday at the end of the summit.

Vietnam, Peru and Russia will join current members Australia, Brunei, Canada, China, Chile, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, the Philippines, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand and the United States.

At the leaders' meeting on Tuesday, Dr Mahathir had personally extended Malaysia's invitation to the heads of Government to go to Kuala Lumpur next year.

Next year will see Apec celebrating its 10th anniversary and Dr Mahathir said the meeting in Kuala Lumpur would be a good opportunity for the group to look back at its progress and achievements in the areas of trade and investment liberalisation and facilitation.

It would also emphasise capacity-building for member economies, especially the developing ones, in the areas of human resource development, technical development, economic and technical co-operation, small- and medium-sized enterprises, as well as harnessing the benefits of information technology.

An Apec agenda for science and technology, as well as industrial co-operation in the 21st century will also be formulated.

A proposal, which was first made in Vancouver, of collaboration in responding to emergency situations within Apec will also be fleshed out.

Also to be finalised for adoption by members will be the work programmes for fast-track liberalisation of nine economic sectors - ranging from consumer products to commodities to high technology items - with the aim towards tariff reduction beginning Jan 1, 1999.

This year's Apec meeting in Vancouver had identified the sectors for fast-track liberalisation to complement Apec's existing trade liberalisation and facilitation programmes.

On the entry of Russia into Apec, Dr Mahathir said sooner or later the country, which was currently more pre-occupied with the West, would have to engage itself with the rest of the world.

"Russia's participation will add more spice to the discussions, as well as make it more interesting and may provide balance to the annual Apec meetings."

Dr Mahathir was also asked about the possibility of an alternative summit made up of non-governmental organisations being held in Kuala Lumpur, as was the case in Vancouver.

Here, during the duration of the Apec meeting, a people's summit was held during which issues ranging from human rights and the environment

were discussed. The Canadian Government had even provided a modest sum of money for its organisation.

"We are prepared to consider a peoples' summit or an alternative summit provided (the participants) do not put up their middle fingers and point them skywards, because that's rude and in Malaysia we like polite people," the Prime Minister said.

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