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Poorer Apec nations `need consideration'

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WITH the currency problems set to be raised at the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation meeting in Vancouver two weeks from now, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said it was important that richer members gave due consideration to the plight of poorer Apec members who were more susceptible to currency volatility.

The Prime Minister, who said he would raise "whatever in my head regarding the currency issue", added that Apec should view the issue with a sense of sympathy even though richer members had not been adversely affected.

"You cannot just say this is the impact of market forces," Dr Mahathir told a Press conference at the end of the Global Panel 1997 in Kuala Lumpur yesterday.

He pointed out that Apec members had not yet reached the same level of development.

The Prime Minister on Monday delivered the keynote address at the Global Panel 1997 which brings together politicians, academicians, and businessmen from Asia and Europe.

Dr Mahathir answered a range of questions including those on Malaysia-US relations; a move by the US Congress over an alleged remark by Dr Mahathir concerning the Jews; the impact of currency volatility on Malaysia's trade with the US and Europe; the impact of devaluation on competitiveness; and liberalisation.

On an upcoming visit by French President Jacques Chirac, Dr Mahathir said Chirac would be on holiday.

Acknowledging that Chirac and he were on good terms, Dr Mahathir said they would discuss a wide range of issues and they would not be confined to currency problems.

On the stop-over by International Monetary Fund managing director Michel Camdessus, the Prime Minister said Camdessus would meet Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim who is also Finance Minister.

Dr Mahathir had discussed this with Anwar, and said if necessary he (the Prime Minister) would also meet Camdessus.

Camdessus is expected to discuss moves to regulate currency trading.

On the impact of Malaysia's currency problems on trade, he said the country's trading partners would feel the pinch as the currency crisis had caused the "disappearance" of US\$35 billion (RM115.50 billion) from the gross domestic product.

For the region, the overall figure was US\$100 billion and this would have an impact on the country's purchasing power.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia's trading partners like Europe would feel the pressure, and that the crisis might also cause unemployment in countries they trade with.

When asked what influence his remarks on currency trading had over the financial markets, the Prime Minister said he knew exactly how currency trading worked and how it was manipulated.

"I am being looked upon as someone exposing them (speculators)," he added.

On the reported move by a US Congressman to sponsor a resolution against him for his alleged anti-American and anti-Jewish remarks, the Prime Minister reiterated that he had not said that the currency crisis was a Jewish plot.

"What I said (was) it so happened that the traders were of Jewish origin and that the people who suffered happened to be two big Muslim countries," he said.

The Prime Minister said he was aware that a lot of (malicious) things were said about him, for example how his meeting with President Fidel Castro of Cuba was described on the Internet as "this Pariah meets the other Pariah.

"Okay, I did not protest. You have the Internet. You want to have a go at me, curse me, call me whatever. Okay, that's free Press, free world," he added.

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