

Keep economy, politics apart, says Howard

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KUALA LUMPUR: Apec should keep political and economic issues separate lest it becomes "just another body," Australian Prime Minister John Howard said.

"It is highly desirable that we continue to try to do so, otherwise it becomes yet another body. It loses its relevance," he said.

Responding to a question at a press conference at the conclusion of the Apec Summit yesterday, Howard said it was "perfectly realistic" to keep trying to detach political and economic issues in Apec.

However, he said it was also realistic to expect political issues to intrude into the forum from time to time.

He also noted that the speech by US Vice-President Al Gore on Monday was delivered outside the formal Apec meeting.

Gore's remarks, which many found to be rude, were delivered at a dinner hosted by the Apec

Business Advisory Council.

Howard said he did not think that the US-Malaysia row had any impact on the outcome of the meeting.

It did not have an iota of impact whether on the mood of the declaration or the quality of the debates, he said.

Asked for his observations on Gore and Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during the Apec leaders' retreat at Cyberjaya, he said: "They were perfectly civil to each other. Everything was perfectly harmonious and civil but I'm not going to get into it. That's a matter for them."

Howard said it was in Australia's national interest to have a good relationship with Malaysia.

On the absence of US President Bill Clinton, he said it was always helpful to have the US president present.

"But he had reasons for not coming, which I understand," he said.

Asked if the outcome of the meeting may have been different with Clinton's presence, he said:

"It may have gone differently. It's always better to have the occupant of the most powerful political position in the world around the table."

To a question, Howard said previous expectations of Apec might have been too high.

"People have more realistic expectations now," he said.

Although Apec's role might evolve and there would inevitably be some changes, it was still fundamentally a body about trade and globalisation, he said.

It was also about encouraging growth among member countries and lifting the standards of living of the people, he added.

Howard also said that the decision on the Early Voluntary Sectoral Liberalisation plan, although only "second best," was no small achievement.