

Dr M: Apec must not be turned into a political forum²⁷

TOKYO: The Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation must not be turned into a political forum or it could spell disaster, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

"Apec is about economics, not politics. It would be a tragedy if it were converted into a political forum," the Prime Minister said.

He was asked to comment on reports that Philippine President Joseph Estrada

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and Indonesian President B.J. Habibie might not attend the Apec summit in Kuala Lumpur next month over the arrest of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

Dr Mahathir said they "would be missing something because we have some very important economic matters to discuss," adding that he was told that US President Bill Clinton and Russian President Boris

Yeltsin would be attending.

On whether he thought it was a kind of diplomatic threat, Dr Mahathir said he did not know Estrada very well while Habibie knew Anwar better than him:

"Naturally, he is sympathetic towards Anwar," he said, adding: "As someone who once boycotted the Apec summit in Seattle (1993), I can understand this (the position of Estrada and Hab-

bie)."

Dr Mahathir felt that Estrada and Habibie were not really aware of the facts.

"They have been watching news reported by the western media which makes us out as undemocratic, unjust and unfair," he said.

On his cancelled trip to Indonesia, he explained that he could not go because he was busy.

On Malaysia's relations

with Singapore following the release of a book by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew, Dr Mahathir said leaders should be sensitive to the feelings of their neighbours.

He said Singapore sometimes made comments which hurt not just the Malaysian Government but the people as well. "Now our past leaders, who have passed away, are vilified, our people feel very angry."