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APEC-NEWS-FIRE
AL GORE UNDER FIRE AS APEC SUMMIT KICKS OFF

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KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 17 (Bernama) -- U.S. Vice-President Al Gore brought with him to Kuala Lumpur the "American message" -- Democracy and Self-Government -- apparently not realising that Malaysia is a practising democracy having attained self-government and independence in 1957.

Barely 24 hours after setting foot on Malaysian soil, Gore turned the mighty American guns on crisis-hit Asian economies for "ignoring calls for reforms and democracy" despite chilling reports of human rights abuses back home.

"Among nations suffering economic crisis, we continue to hear calls for democracy in many languages," Gore said at an Apec Business Summit dinner on the eve of the Apec leaders summit here.

He tried to impress upon his audience which included some world leaders as well as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and over 1,000 captains of industry on the need for countries to have greater democracy and transparency.

Gore standing in for President Bill Clinton for the Apec summit said that democracy conferred a stamp of legitimacy that reforms must have in order to be effective.

Gore's statement ignited sharp protests and enraged both foreign and local leaders who accused him of meddling in the internal affairs of sovereign nations.

"Rude", "Arrogant", "Double Standards", "Irresponsible" were some of the words used to describe Gore's speech. However speaking to reporters today the Vice President said he was "proud" to deliver the American message of democracy.

He incurred the wrath of Malaysian International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz who said it was "the most disgusting speech I've heard in my life".

"To me, as a government minister, I am disgusted," she declared.

Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said Apec leaders should not stray from economic issues.

"Leaders who want to bring up political issues should do so at bilateral meetings rather than use the regional economic forum," Goh said.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jenny Shipley said she was worried that Gore's "megaphone diplomacy" was threatening Apec.

Gore's statement also met with sharp criticisms from his own people.

Noel Gould, a member of the US-Asean Business Council, said it was unfortunate that Gore took "a dramatically different approach" although Malaysia had been a "great" host for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum.

Some felt that Gore's statement could backfire.

A Chinese delegate said Dr Mahathir had won many new supporters and Gore had "basically shot himself in the foot. It was both inappropriate and the wrong time on a wrong subject matter."

Reporters who covered the dinner here last night said that soon after Gore spoke and walked out of the dinner, many foreign leaders and delegates went up and spoke to Dr Mahathir.

But one Apec delegate decided to go a step further in his criticism of Gore's dinner speech.

He said that while Gore spoke about democracy and human rights, more than 1.7 million people are in prisons in the United States with more than

60 percent of them from ethnic minorities.

Amnesty International, a human rights group in its recent report entitled "United States: Rights for All" spoke of "a persistent and widespread pattern of human rights violations" in the United States.

The study pointed to "entrenched and nationwide police brutality." It highlighted the physical and sexual abuse of prisoners many of whom being held in inhuman and degrading conditions.

Amnesty noted that the substance of the report provides a "sometimes chilling indictment of federal and state authorities in the U.S."

"When its own house is not in order, it makes it far harder for the U.S. to take the kind of leadership role in international human rights that many of us in Amnesty would like to see it take," said William Schulz, executive director of the American chapter of the London-based Amnesty International.

Amnesty, a long-time opponent of the death penalty, alleges that in the U.S. it is used in a way which was "racist, arbitrary and unfair."

Observers said that in short the U.S. has been accused of double standards; preaching lofty principles at home and abroad while not abiding by these high standards itself.

"There is much ammunition here for America's critics," said one political observer.

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