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AN AMERICAN NIGHTMARE IN MALAYSIA

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KUALA LUMPUR, Nov 18 (Bernama) -- The tendency of the United States to poke its nose into other people's affairs reared its ugly head again when US Vice-President Al Gore made insensitive remarks by condoning street demonstrations in Malaysia.

Gore ignored the people's sensitivity by supporting the civil disorder of supporters of former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim while here for the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) leaders' summit.

With several Apec economies including Malaysia facing their worst financial and economic crisis, an American diatribe on human rights and democracy was the least they wanted to hear.

But it did happen.

Such interference was even more irritating when the White House endorsed his remarks which also described the street demonstrators as the "brave" people of Malaysia, leaving a broad spectrum of Malaysians furious.

But when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was pressed for his comments on Gore's remarks, the Malaysian leader displayed sheer statesmanship by keeping his cool in handling questions during a news conference at the end of the Apec summit here.

Despite a barrage of questions on Gore, the Prime Minister adopted a diplomatic stance and merely said whatever comments that needed to be made about the speech had already been made and "I don't see a need to say anything more than that."

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi had issued a sharp rebuke on Gore's statement and said Malaysia viewed the remarks as a gross interference in the internal affairs of the country.

International trade and industry minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz also expressed indignation over Gore's remarks, which many had described as being out of place.

Dr Mahathir downplayed the issue by saying that there was no change in relations between Kuala Lumpur and Washington as a result of the comments uttered by America's second most powerful man.

US meddling is nothing new to most parts of the world from Latin America to Baghdad, China and now Malaysia. The attempt by Gore to politicise the 21-member forum has drawn strong protests from many, not the least Apec leaders themselves, who felt politics should be kept out of the meeting rooms where discussions on resuscitating haemorrhaging economies should take priority.

The vice president has since been heaped with many unsavoury epithets -- rude, stupid, arrogant and the Malay term "kurang ajar" which means bad breeding.

Besides his stinging speech, Gore also had the gall to walk out of the dinner function without touching his food.

Prior to the Apec meetings here, Malaysia had maintained that the issue surrounding Anwar's dismissal and court trial should not be dragged into the picture. Instead, the summit should focus on economic matters.

But several leaders including Philippine President Joseph Estrada and US Secretary of State Albright took it upon themselves to meet Anwar's wife Datin Seri Wan Azizah Wan Ismail in a show of support for Anwar.

Another Apec member, Japan, was also the target of American manoeuvres over its (Japan's) refusal to budge from opening up its fisheries and

forestry sectors under the early voluntary sectoral liberalisation scheme (EVSL).

Many are associating the Kuala Lumpur summit with its inability to reach an accord on tariff cuts for all the nine sectors under the fast-track EVSL package which has been referred to the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

But the fact is that the US may find it tougher to push through such cuts via the WTO, an organisation with market-protective members including several countries in Europe.

Also, one cannot help but notice how the US is magnifying the relatively little amount of money it has pledged to help Asian economies buffeted by the 16-month old financial crisis.

The US\$5 billion to be contributed by the US as part of the joint Japan-US US\$10 billion relief package for Asia pales in comparison to a separate plan by Japan to help revive affected economies in the region under its US\$30 billion Miyazawa Plan.

This does not include Japan's quick disbursement of funds to the tune of US\$30 billion through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to help the ravaged economies of Indonesia, South Korea and Thailand.

On the contrary, the US Congress had for quite some time blocked the release of funds by Washington to Indonesia.

Gore might have wanted to boost his chances for the US presidency, but he could have done himself more harm than good since some sections of the American business community had distanced themselves from his remarks.

Gore had intended to make a lasting impression during his stay here but like it or not, the Kuala Lumpur summit will always be remembered for the "kurang asam Mat Salleh" who came, saw but never conquered.

-- BERNAMA

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