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AUSTRALIA-APEC

AUSTRALIA'S FISCHER SLAMS JAPAN'S APEC STANCE

SYDNEY, Nov 19 (Bernama-Kyodo) -- Australian Trade Minister Tim Fischer said today the outcome of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) summit in Kuala Lumpur was a "second best" result, undermined by Japan's opposition to trade liberalization in forestry and fishery products.

Fischer, who is also deputy prime minister, said Japan's position on the Early Voluntary Sectoral Liberalization (Evsl) initiative was "mightily underwhelming" and unfair to other Asian countries.

"It was not a fair cop to the other nations...Full marks to those countries who were in there batting for trade liberalization," he said.

Reflecting Japan's refusal to participate in tariff cuts for fishery and forestry products, two of the nine sectors picked up for the initiative, Apec left a final conclusion on the issue to talks at the world trade organization.

Fischer said that nevertheless, the two-day summit that ended yesterday was not a failure, and that Apec would be around for a long time.

"It is too early to pronounce the death of Apec," he said. "It did not back-flip into protectionism. It is a second best way forward, but nevertheless a way forward."

Fischer dismissed comments by United States vice president Al Gore about the Malaysian democracy movement as "a play for the cameras."

Gore lauded Malaysian opposition groups' call for reform and change at a function in Kuala Lumpur on the eve of the Apec summit, which was attended by Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"Among nations suffering economic crises, we continue to hear calls for democracy, calls for 'reformasi'," Gore said, using the Malay word for reform that is the slogan of supporters of ousted deputy prime minister Anwar Ibrahim.

Fischer said the Australian way of "forthright" communication with Mahathir on human rights was more constructive.

-- Bernama-Kyodo

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