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#### Efficient accreditation secretariat officials

FOR people anxious they had not applied for passes for the sixth Apec Economic Leaders Meeting, their day got off brilliantly yesterday.

Their anxiety was wiped out in 15 minutes, which was roughly how long officials manning the accreditation secretariat took to process and issue on-the-spot the all-important "badge".

Over at the charming Palace of Golden Horses hotel - also the venue of G15 meeting and the Informal Asean Summit last year - delegates attending the informal Senior Officials Meeting found further evidence why reaching agreements on the various delicate stages of liberalisation was never going to be a breeze.

The informal SOM - as these preparatory meetings are referred to at major international meetings - swiftly identified one of its main problems.

This concerned a programme to cut tariffs called the Early Voluntary Sectoral Liberalisation scheme.

Along the corridors yesterday, this was the burning issue as observers not familiar with it swung to get a fast-track education on the subject.

"I just learnt the term today," a journalist said. EVSL seeks to have Apec economies "voluntarily" eliminate tariffs before the agreed goal of the year 2010 for industrialised economies and 2020 for developing ones.

Fifteen sectors are involved. By the end of 2005, for instance, Apec is calling for the elimination of tariffs in the fisheries sector, and at earlier dates for wood, furniture, pulp, paper and printed products.

However, Japan, which is the world's largest importer of fishery products and meets 80 per cent of its timber demand with imports, contends that the tariff issue should only be discussed at the World Trade Organisation.

There were also reports that Japan was planning to give millions of dollars in aid for the fishery and forestry sectors in Asia.

The senior officials had a separate discussion on the issue. The head of the Russian delegation, Andrei Denisov, who is the director of the Department of Economic Cooperation at the Russian Foreign Ministry, was an attraction among journalists since this important economy is a new member of Apec.

At the day-end Press conference, Abdul Razak Ramli, the SOM chair and deputy secretary-general of the International Trade and Industry Ministry, reported that EVSL was the only issue pending to be discussed last night.

"One economy has expressed political difficulties," said Abdul Razak, expertly warding off journalists' request for more details with such remarks as "there is the danger of crossing the line", and "I may be on the chair, but instructions came from ministers."

"We are still trying to obtain the maximum outcome," explained a New Zealand delegate later as officials prepare to continue deliberations on the EVSL.

Other than that, the informal SOM yesterday also reviewed arrangements for the Apec Economic Leaders Meeting and finalised reports to the ministers such as on the individual and collective action plans.

"A report to the ministers on the review of the Management of the Apec Process was also finalised. Several recommendations will be forwarded to ministers for endorsement," said a statement.

A report on the Impact of Expanding Population and Economic Growth on

Food, Energy and the Environment will also be tabled for the approval of the ministers.

The ministers will be checking in today. This is when the issue which had battered some economies - the financial crisis including short-term capital flows - is likely to begin to surface.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who had come up with specific proposals to regulate currency trading, will open the Third Apec International Trade Fair '98 today.

The real action has not yet begun. As for now, the big-picture situation is coming only in bits and pieces. Said Razak yesterday, as he concluded the Press conference: "I think I have repeated myself too much."

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