

17/11/1998

Gore's Abac dinner speech causes a stir

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US VICE President Al Gore caused a stir at the gala dinner at the last day of the Apec Business Summit last night by expressing support for the anti-government "reformasi" movement and calling the protesters "brave people of Malaysia".

"It is the most disgusting speech I have ever heard in my life and I hope I never live to hear another one like that again," an incensed International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Dr Rafidah Aziz said.

She expressed regret that the Abac event was "completely spoilt" by the American leader.

The other dinner guests at her table, including American businessmen and officials and those from New Zealand, were equally "disgusted" and had offered their apologies, she said.

"They were totally flabbergasted. I suppose we have to expect it when people are narrow-minded but this certainly reflects their unabashed intervention in local affairs. On top of that, he does not even understand... or know a thing of what is going on in this country. To talk about 'people power' when demonstrations are going on Indonesia and lives are lost and condoning it... my God," she raged.

"We did not expect this... even the American private sector did not expect this. We do expect lectures when leaders come and make speeches... but not to run a country down and insult.

"We are doing our best in this part of the world to effect economic recovery... we don't play politics... for Heaven's sake, try to understand what is really going on in a country before you open your mouth and put your big foot into it," Rafidah said.

YTL Corp managing director Tan Sri Francis Yeoh said the US Vice President's remarks reflected the shallow understanding of certain foreigners to the plight and problems faced by the country.

"I feel very disappointed over their inability to understand and their superficial view of what is happening in this country. Such a broad brush is very disappointing for lots of us who are working very hard to foster understanding. This does not help...," he said.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jenny Shipley, when approached, said she would rather not comment.

Apec Business Advisory Council chairman Tan Sri Tajuddin Ramli said an official statement may be issued on the matter.

Addressing over 1,000 business leaders and government officials, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Gore had said: "Among nations suffering economic crisis, we continue to hear calls for democracy in many languages, 'people power,' 'Doi Moi,' 'reformasi,'... we hear them today - right here, right now - among the brave people of Malaysia."

(END)