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Leaders get a feel of local colour

CLEAR skies and brilliantly coloured batik shirts brightened up the Apec summit atmosphere at Cyberjaya yesterday where 21 Pacific rim leaders adjourned for their customary retreat.

Handshakes and greetings were also aplenty as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad welcomed each of his guests who started arriving at 8am, extending the warmth of Malaysian hospitality to all, including US Vice-President Al Gore.

The leaders smiled and appeared relaxed as they stood for the photograph on the lawn of the Cyberview Lodge, in the middle of an oil palm plantation 40km south of Kuala Lumpur.

Dr Mahathir was dressed in pink batik, believed to be his wife Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali's favourite colour. Gore was in red, and Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov in yellow.

New Zealand Prime Minister Jenny Shipley, the only woman leader at the summit, wore a sky blue kebaya, complete with selendang.

It has been a tradition at every Apec Economic Leaders' Meeting for participating heads of state to be given clothing that reflects the culture of their host country. At last year's summit in Vancouver, Canada, they wore leather jackets.

The other leaders were clad in shades of red, blue, purple, green and yellow, creating a tasteful riot of colours that has come to be a trademark of typical Malaysian wear.

The silk batik clothing was designed by Sharifah Hishmah Shahabuddin, who also designed the silk batik shirts for leaders at the G15 summit here in November last year.

Sharifah Hishmah, who's also a favourite batik shirtmaker for the cream of Malaysia's political and business community, has said that the painstaking, handpainted design on each shirt took between two and three days to complete.

The design theme: Malaysia's natural beauty and harmony. The price tag: RM500 for each shirt.

The leaders' spouses meanwhile, will not leave the Apec meeting empty-handed. They've also been presented with small batik-clad dolls in memory of their time in Malaysia.

Dr Mahathir had said that Cyberjaya was chosen for the retreat to provide the leaders with lush greenery and a scenic landscape apart from showcasing the Multimedia Super Corridor.

Besides Dr Mahathir and Shipley, the other leaders at the retreat were Australian Prime Minister John Howard, Brunei's Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, Canada's Prime Minister Jean Chretien, Chile's President Eduardo Frei, Chinese President Jiang Zemin, Hong Kong, China, Chief Executive Tung Chee Hwa, Indonesia's President B.J. Habibie;

Also present were Japan's Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi; South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung; Mexican President Ernesto Zedillo; Papua New Guinea's Prime Minister Bill Skate; Philippines President Joseph Estrada; Singapore's Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong; Chinese Taipei's representative Dr Chiang Pin-kung; Thai Prime Minister Chuan Leekpai; US Vice-President Al Gore; Peru's President Alberto Fujimori; Russian Prime Minister Yevgeny Primakov; and Vietnam's Prime Minister Phan Van Khai.

The leaders started the day with a group photograph at the lodge's poolside.

They then proceeded to the mini-conference hall for their "retreat meeting".

The meeting, lasting about six hours, culminated with the reading of the Apec Declaration by Dr Mahathir, who is also Apec chairman.

The leaders then bade farewell to each other.

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