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Chretien owes Malaysian public an explanation

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I AM proud that our country has hosted the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) Summit. No effort had been spared to ensure that our foreign guests and their delegations were comfortable and safe. We have shown once again that, like the best ever 16th Commonwealth Games we staged last September, we are good hosts to the Apec Summit.

As a Malaysian, I am concerned, however, about reports that some Apec heads of government are using the so-called Malaysian "political crisis" as a pretext to divert attention from their domestic problems. The Honourable Jean Chretien, Prime Minister of Canada, the host of the 1997 Apec Summit in Vancouver, may be one of them.

It is reliably understood that, after having consulted President Bill Clinton, Mr Chretien announced on November 7 that he will decline a meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. We know the background. Both Mr Clinton and Mr Chretien have their own domestic political problems. It is inappropriate for us polite Malaysians - unlike Mr Al Gore, the US Vice-President - to comment since both the US President and the Canadian Prime Minister should be left alone to deal with this matter.

Mr Chretien's stance must be due to the sharp decline in his personal popularity and that of his Liberal Party today. He needed a bogey. Who cares, if it is Malaysia and Dr Mahathir, the host himself. It does speak volumes of the man's understanding of international relations, and the bureaucrats in the Canadian Foreign Office in Ottawa. Being incapable of making a homespun and independent decision they sought the moral support of Mr Clinton. I sincerely hope they were not acting in concert to undermine Apec and scuttle the Kuala Lumpur Summit which was being hosted by Dr Mahathir.

It is sad that Canada and the Liberal Party which Mr Chretien leads have been marginalised by the US. The great and rich Canadian tradition on international development, UN peacekeeping and the honest broker role in international relations, fashioned by Lester Pearson and Pierre Trudeau, seems to have been abandoned in favor of a more subservient role to a hegemonic and powerful neighbour. Both Mr Pearson and Mr Trudeau created this unique role for Canada so that the country was not to be subsumed by the US.

Mr Pearson and Mr Trudeau made important contributions to nurturing a supportive global environment, including setting aside 0.7 per cent of the GNP for aid. Today's aid-driven trade policy and misguided attention to the concept of human rights, which works on the premise that "It is my right" only. It smacks of self-righteousness.

Worse still, Mr Chretien has willy-nilly compromised Canada's independence and sovereignty by taking a highly pro-US foreign policy stance. Doesn't Mr Chretien realise that democracy and human rights, the rallying ethos of the US, are now being used as grounds for interfering in the internal affairs of emerging and other developing countries, including Malaysia.

Canada, particularly under Mr Chretien, also appears to give scant regard to Apec's conventions and practices. Are Apec and its processes not to be taken seriously? Am I to believe that Canada is in Apec because the US is in it? One need only recall that when Australia first mooted the idea of Apec in 1989, Canada and the US tried to thwart it. Only after the

US was persuaded did Canada rush in to embrace Apec.

Canada came on board so as not be labelled or seen as a "developing country economy" dependent for some 350 years on raw material exports. Its only manufacturing credentials do not go much beyond GM Canada, GE Canada, Toyota Canada and other clones. What can you possibly teach Malaysia?

Malaysians attach importance to having good relations with Canada and its people. Quite a few Malaysians, for example, have benefitted in the 1960s from Canada's contributions to the Colombo Plan. Unlike the US, Canada and Malaysia are members of the Commonwealth. Canadian athletes gave a good account of themselves at the September 1998 Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur. We can share and learn from each other. We should not spoil a long standing partnership based on mutual respect.

Mr Chretien, and the same goes for US Vice President Gore, can perhaps learn from New Zealand. Although Prime Minister Jenny Shipley, the hostess for the 1999 Apec Summit in Auckland, is a relative newcomer to the Apec fraternity, she accepted Dr Mahathir's invitation with a very kind, gracious and considerate response. Her response was mature and stateswoman-like. She was quoted as saying that "it is not New Zealand's style to boycott meetings with international leaders because of differences of opinion". Her main objective is to "promote New Zealand's interests". Since Apec is about economics, not politics, Prime Minister Shipley means that she is going to champion her country's economic interests through Apec.

We hope Mr Chretien, who has been warmly welcomed in Kuala Lumpur, has witnessed for himself that Malaysia is a vibrant democratic country with pride in its values, traditions and achievements. Our multiracial society is founded on tolerance, understanding and mutual respect. As Malaysians, we jealously protect our political culture and stability. We may not agree with you, but we respect you as the head of a constitutionally-elected government. We naturally expect that respect to be reciprocated.

So, Mr Chretien, you owe us, the majority of Malaysians, an explanation. For starters, you could explain who was behind efforts to shift the Apec venue from Kuala Lumpur.