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Speech `reinforces image of US as a bully'

"WRONG place, wrong time, wrong tone" - this was the Singapore Straits Times' view of US Vice-President Al Gore's speech at the Apec Business Summit dinner on Monday.

"Clearly, Mr Gore's words and action breached the basic rules of courtesy," the newspaper said.

The Singapore newspaper was one of many which reported as well as commented on the US leader's speech.

It also said that Gore "only reinforced the impression of America as a bully bent on imposing its ways on others".

While the United States had the right to emphasise the importance of freedom to global markets, the message was delivered in flagrant disregard of the occasion and the host, the Straits Times said.

This, it said, would do nothing to advance democracy's cause and, instead, might have cost the United States the opportunity to exercise leadership.

The Apec summit should have been used to seek joint action to beat the crisis, the paper said.

The paper praised the earlier part of Gore's speech where he underlined the importance of Apec and trade liberalisation, but said he then "proceeded to unravel all that with his comments on Malaysia".

It also said that the US message on democracy had not always been consistent.

While Gore implied in his speech that the forces of democracy in Indonesia had triumphed, "the world cannot forget that in the early months of this year, the US treated former President Suharto with a lot more solicitude than it is showing Dr Mahathir now," it said.

The New York Times said Gore's blunt words, and Malaysia's enraged reaction, have left the meeting of Pacific Rim nations in a shambles.

The situation was so bad, the paper said, that "discussions of how to lower trade barriers or rein in global capital flows were scarcely heard on Tuesday".

"There were sharp divisions over whether the vice-president had taken a principled stand in defence of human rights or hijacked a meeting intended to be devoted to the Asian financial crisis."

The newspaper also reported that New Zealand's Prime Minister, Jenny Shipley, accused Gore of practising "megaphone diplomacy", while officials from Singapore and China offered more subtle criticism of the speech - reaffirming that they would stick to economic matters and not wade into the affairs of other countries.

It also reported that the President of the Philippines, Joseph Estrada, said in an interview that he felt "the same way as the vice-president".

The newspaper added that some political analysts who support former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said they were troubled by the stridency of the speech.

"They said Gore might have played into the hands of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who has used anti-Western jeremiads for years as a means to galvanise his mostly rural supporters," the paper said.

It also quoted Dr Chandra Muzaffar as saying that Gore's speech would give "ammunition to Dr Mahathir to discredit the reform movement, in the sense that he can now say it is sponsored by the US".

The Asian Wall Street Journal, in its editorial yesterday, said: "What

Mr Gore thought he was doing by explicitly cheering for Malaysian protesters and their rallying cry of reformasi is less clear.

"The list of mottos he toasted also included Vietnam's doi moi. It's a strange combination, equating "people power" with the official slogan of a Vietnamese communist party that clearly has no intention of surrendering power to the people.

"So strange," the paper said, "that one wonders if Mr Gore and his speechwriter really knew what they were talking about."

The paper also said that "for all the fuss about protocol, the biggest insult to Malaysia may be the recognition that this US Administration only goes after targets it perceives to be soft and easy.

"China will never get the dinner party honesty treatment, and Saddam Hussein probably won't get bombed," it said.

In Australia, Prime Minister John Howard's refusal to endorse Gore's statement was seen as hiding a political motive.

Paul Kelly, one of Australia's foremost commentators in The Australian, said Howard needed to retain influence in the region and was trying to achieve a balanced and realistic response, but in reality did not approve of Dr Mahathir using the organs of the State against political opponents.

The Sydney Morning Herald said Gore's comments were designed "to pour petrol on an already volatile fire".

"Gore is already positioning himself for a run in the next presidential election and an aggressive human rights stance, particularly when applied to a distant small economy, plays well with the American voters," chief political correspondent Michael Millet wrote.

But, he added, it handed Howard an unexpected headache by taking the focus away from what he saw as Apec's primary objective - dealing with the Asian meltdown.

"Howard's 'Australian way', Millet said, differs little from the approach adopted by his predecessors Paul Keating and Bob Hawke in dealing with ticklish regional issues.

"All three have advocated the need for Australia to stick to its liberal democratic principals, but to acknowledge that other countries, particularly in Asia, will see and do things differently."

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