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Students get chance of a lifetime

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IT was a once-in-a-lifetime experience for about 30 students when they got to interview world and business leaders during the Apec-Multimedia Super Corridor Virtual Trade Mission Global Interview held in conjunction with the Apec summit in Kuala Lumpur.

Students were divided into groups of two or three for the interviews.

The students, consisting Malaysians and foreigners studying in Malaysia, were informed of their selection a week before the event. They frantically surfed the Net and read up on business issues to prepare for the interviews.

Later, 15 Americans joined the group. Then, it was down to the serious business of gaining insight into US trade and Apec issues.

In between boxed lunches because of the tight schedule, the students listened to briefings by Kevin H. Koonce, legislative assistant to US Senator Jesse Helms, and Eric P. Farnsworth, a senior advisor on trade issues who has worked for the White House.

The students also carried out mock interviews.

VTM Foundation chairman Noel Gould told the students: "Relax. Don't be nervous. Remember, it is the interviewees who will be more nervous as they do not know what questions will be thrown at them."

For many, it was having the camera focus on them that was more unnerving than the actual interviews.

Universiti Tenaga undergraduate Idlan Rabihah Zakaria, who interviewed Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, says: "He put us at ease when he sat down and smiled at us. Actually, I was more nervous because the camera was focused on us."

Idlan and her classmates were puzzled over the rationale of the Government pegging the US dollar at RM3.80.

"We were saying the only way we were ever going to get an answer would be if we were to ask the Prime Minister himself," says Idlan, a member of the NST's Writers Bloc.

"Imagine my surprise when I was told that I would be interviewing him. Of course, I asked that question."

New Zealander Samantha Clifton, 14, a student at the International School of Kuala Lumpur, interviewed her country's Prime Minister Jenny Shipley.

"I have always dreamed about meeting my Prime Minister and I managed to do just that. I was not nervous although the camera did make me feel a little uncomfortable."

Nadjea Butler from Chicago Vocational Career Academy, who was also in the team who interviewed Shipley, says: "The Prime Minister put us at ease when she began to talk about women and their involvement in politics before the interview proper."

Khoo Choo Ki from Sekolah Menengah Catholic Petaling Jaya interviewed the Apec representative in Singapore, Tom Engle, but had the chance to pose a question to Dr Mahathir during a dialogue session.

"I asked a question that was youth-related while the others had all posed economic questions," she says.

"He looked at me and seemed surprised, and I felt a little uncomfortable."

However, Khoo had an easier time in her interview with Engle.

"He was easy to talk to and gave straightforward answers," Khoo says.

Pia Roy, a science student at Tunku Abdul Rahman College, Kuala Lumpur, interviewed Sandra Kristoff, director of international government relations of New York Life Insurance. "I started off by pretending that the camera was not there," says Roy.

"Kristoff did not have a smile on her face initially, but then she smiled and said 'This is fun' and that instantly put us at ease.

"When I asked the first question, I could feel my hands shaking, although I tried not to show this. And, before I knew it, the interview was coming to an end and I had to round up quickly as Dr Mahathir was coming on next to be interviewed by my colleagues."

Ong Chong Yi from Sekolah Menengah Sultan Abdul Samad Petaling Jaya, who interviewed Australia's Abac member Imelda Roche, says: "I was a little nervous but once you are up there, you just have to keep going and somehow we just did that. I got lots of opportunities to ask questions and I really enjoyed the session."

Janice Margaret Lowley from the Chicago Vocational Academy Career, who interviewed Dr Victor K. Fung, chairman of the Hong Kong Trade Development Council, says: "I am going to look back on this day and it will definitely have a major impact on my future."

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