

31/08/1998

Vietnam only Asean country represented at the highest level

Syed Nadzri in Durban

THE absence of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad leaves Vietnam as the only country from Asean to be represented at the highest level at the 12th Non-Aligned Movement summit here.

Vietnam has president Tran Duc Luong leading its delegation while Malaysia, Laos, Indonesia, Singapore, Thailand and Brunei will all be represented by their respective Foreign Ministers.

Myanmar and the Philippines, the other two member countries of Asean, are not among the 113 members of NAM.

Dr Mahathir had said in Kuala Lumpur on Saturday that he would not be attending the summit, due to start on Wednesday, as he had to remain in Malaysia to look into domestic affairs.

Dr Mahathir has now delegated the Durban task to Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who arrived late yesterday.

Foreign Ministry deputy secretary-general 11 Datuk N Parameswaran said Abdullah will also read out Dr Mahathir's speech at the summit either on Wednesday or Thursday.

Dr Mahathir's decision has been conveyed to South African President Nelson Mandela and Malaysian officials are confident the host would understand.

There has been no official comment yet from the organisers on the decision, but it was clear that the Prime Minister was one of the leaders delegates were looking forward to having at the summit.

Dr Mahathir had in fact been billed by the organisers and the local Press as one of the high-profile leaders taking part.

Malaysian officials believe that the country's stand on several issues would be firmly stated at the summit despite the Prime Minister's absence.

Abdullah is expected to speak strongly especially on economic issues related to the international currency problems.

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