

'Asian recovery earlier than expected'

BANGKOK, Sun: The Asian economic crisis ended more quickly than anyone expected, thanks to the strengths that led to the continent's extraordinary growth in the first place, a senior UN official said today.

Rubens Ricupero, secretary-general of the UN Conference on Trade and Development (Unctad), told a news conference that Asia's rebound would be a prime **topic** at Unctad's

four-yearly meeting hosted by Thailand February 12-19 in Bangkok.

Thailand was the first Asian economy to tumble into severe recession in mid-1997 when a decade-long boom collapsed. The next year, Thailand's economy shrank 10 per cent. But growth swung back to 4 per cent in 1999.

Ricupero said that the World Bank predicts that Asian economies will av-

erage 4 per cent growth this year.

"There is no doubt that in light of the severity of the crisis, the recovery has been surprisingly rapid," said Ricupero, a Brazilian. "I am confident it can be continued."

Thailand and hard-hit Indonesia and South Korea went under bailouts led by the International Monetary Fund, while hard-hit Malaysia did not. In all cases,

their economies have either stabilised or started growing again, and analysts have looked for a common reason.

Ricupero identified the five basic strengths he said led to Asia's rapid economic advances in the 1990s, becoming a model for the rest of the developing world.

These comprised high savings rates, sound mac-

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ro-economic fundamentals, investment in human resources, orienting the economy toward exports, and good partnerships between governments and the private sector.

The biggest remaining challenge is addressing the enormous social dislocation from the crisis, which will not automatically recover along with exports and gross domestic product, Ricupero said.

The meeting in Bangkok will be attended by representatives of 180 countries plus UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan and the heads of IMF, World Bank and World Trade Organisation.

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is also scheduled to attend.

"Yes, he is going. We will release the schedule later," an aide said.

The national *Bernama* news agency quoted Dr Mahathir as telling reporters that Malay& will express concerns of developing nations over the impact of globalisation.

"Trade and development appear to be affected among the developing countries as they cannot adapt themselves with the advent of globalisation and free trade," he said.

Dr Mahathir said developing countries are struggling to assess the impact on trade of mergers of large multinational corporations. — AP, Reuter