

Apec Yes to new trade talks if agenda is ready

From LOKMAN MANSOR

BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN, Thurs: Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) leaders have agreed that a new round of multilateral trade negotiations be launched next year, provided a balanced and broad-based agenda is finalised beforehand.

The 21-member grouping represents two-thirds of the world's population and more than half its output.

Apec ministers who met two days ago had called for the agenda to be finalised by next year before proceeding with the new round of the multilateral trade negotiations.

But in the Leaders' Declaration released at the end of the Apec Summit here today, the members reiterated the need to "expeditiously" launch a new World Trade Organisation (WTO) round for the benefit of all members, particularly least-developed and developing economies.

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"We agree that a balanced and sufficiently broad-based agenda that responds to the interest and concerns of all WTO members should be formulated and finalised as soon as possible in 2001 and that a round be launched in 2001," the declaration reads.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said globalisation and the WTO were the major focus of discussions at the leaders' retreat held at the Jerudong Polo Club.

At a press conference for Malaysian journalists, the Prime Minister said the differently-worded Declaration does not mean that Apec has backtracked on Malaysia's earlier proposal to set a deadline for the agenda first before deciding on a launch date.

"The general opinion is that we should have the launch in

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2001, but it must be preceded by an agreement on the agenda. If there is no agenda how to have a meeting? It (launch) is conditional on having an agenda. And this is not just Malaysia, others speak in the same way," he said.

More than once at this year's Apec meeting, Malaysia was portrayed (particularly by the foreign media) as being against free trade and the WTO by insisting that countries should not rush into fresh talks.

Malaysia's stand has been that an agenda should be clearly defined first, and that any outstanding implementation issues from the previous round of WTO talks be addressed.

Commenting on the perception that Malaysia is an impediment to free trade, Dr Mahathir said: "... (this is) because they don't have enough information about us. Actually 90 per cent of our imports are tax-free, and we don't have tariff barriers like others".

"They say they are tax-free, but they impose tariff barriers based on quotas, bidding for import certificates, bidding for individual purchasing certificates, and things like that. Those (revenues) actually accrue to the government and must be regarded as taxes," he added.

Dr Mahathir reiterated that if an agenda cannot be finalised, then there is no way that a new round of WTO talks can be launched.

"I hope they (trade officials in Geneva) can have an agenda. If they purposely not come up with an agenda, then it will be difficult to have a new round. What are we going to talk about?"

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia also stressed that there should not be any side meetings within the WTO, where particular groups meet separately and attempt to impose their decisions on the rest.

"This should not happen because it will greatly disadvantage those who did not take part in these side meetings," he said, adding that this was done by several developed countries, informally, in Seattle last year.

Dr Mahathir said as an organisation, the WTO must have certain orderliness in its procedures. It must identify the agenda and procedures which nobody can bypass and force their opinion on others.

"We have to agree on the agenda. We cannot simply talk... we must know what to discuss. If you want to talk about free trade, let's talk about free trade and how it is affected by non-tariff barriers, for example," the Prime Minister said.

Dr Mahathir said if the WTO were to approve anti-dumping measures, for example, then they must be standardised and accepted by all, and in that way all countries would comply with the conditions.

"If they say we are dumping a particular product because the price is cheap, it might be because our costs are lower, which they are. Normally, export items are cheaper than the prices within the country because in the country we levy taxes.

"For example, the price of the Proton car is dearer in Malaysia than in foreign countries because they do not have to pay excise duties and others."

On the leaders' retreat, Dr Mahathir said he found that the views of other countries were not much different from Malaysia's. "Many voiced support for the idea that globalisation should be managed well, so that everyone will benefit."

The leaders' dialogue with the Apec Business Advisory Council was also helpful to address the concerns of the business community and to promote investments in countries throughout the region, he said.

Apec groups Australia, Brunei, Canada, Chile, China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, South Korea, Malaysia, Mexico, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Peru, the Philippines, Russia, Singapore, Taiwan, Thailand, the US and Vietnam.