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Apec 2000 in Brunei a success

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THE progress may have been at a snail's pace but surely when the curtains came down at the end of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation summit in Brunei yesterday, some achievements were minuted.

So much so critics who had denounced this grouping as a mere talk shop, predicting that it would slip into oblivion in the not-too-distant future, were made to think again.

The past two Apec meetings - in Kuala Lumpur and Auckland - deviated from the forum's original objectives when delegates insisted that they discuss domestic issues in some member countries.

In the 1998 Apec meeting in Kuala Lumpur, the trial of Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim became an issue.

In Auckland last year, alleged atrocities by Indonesian authorities in East Timor and the ensuing referendum were dragged in.

These issues gave credence to the criticisms levelled at Apec. However, things were different at the meeting in Brunei, which took over the rotating chairmanship for this year.

The most notable among them is the decision by the leaders to accept a Malaysian proposal that an agenda be formulated next year for a new World Trade Organisation round of multilateral trade negotiations before launching the talks.

Although there were many like-minded countries, Malaysia was the most vocal, appearing almost the odd one out.

In the Leaders' Declaration issued at the end of the two-day summit, they agreed that a balanced and sufficiently broad-based agenda that responded to the interests and concerns of all WTO members be formulated and finalised in 2001 with the view of launching the talks in the same year.

Malaysia pushed for an agenda to be in place before actual talks were launched, fearing that the new round would meet with premature death if countries began dragging other issues into the negotiations.

The WTO Ministerial Meeting last year broke down as there was no agenda and developed countries tried to force their own agenda on others. But the developing countries put up a formidable front.

The poorer countries did not want to see a repeat of the Uruguay Round, where they had hastily made several commitments including drastic tariff reductions, only to realise later that it was not to their benefit.

Speaking to reporters at the end of the summit, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Malaysia had given a conditional agreement to the launching of a new round next year but made it clear that it must be preceded by an agenda acceptable to all.

The leaders also announced new strategies to improve the livelihood of the communities in the Pacific Rim.

They agreed to develop a policy framework which would enable the urban, provincial and rural communities in every country to have individual or community-based access to information and services offered via the Internet by 2010.

As a first step towards this goal, Apec members aim to triple the number of people within the region with access to the Internet by 2005.

This is the first time IT issues had been put on the agenda and commitments of leaders on these issues were reflected in the declaration.

Although there were many successes of the Apec 2000 in Brunei, the issue

of escalating oil prices remained unresolved.

Because of deep divisions within the ranks of the economic forum which consisted both oil exporter and consumer nations, the issue was kept out of the Leaders' Declaration.

It seems the matter is best dealt with by Opec (Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries), not Apec.

The point is ,however, the Apec meeting in Brunei achieved more than what was achieved in Kuala Lumpur and Auckland. At least in Brunei, the smallest among the 21 member countries, the forum stuck to economics.

"It was well arranged and we had enough time to discuss issues of common concern. Everything went on smoothly," Dr Mahathir said.

Delegates and members of the media leaving the capital city of Bandar Seri Begawan gave the thumbs up to the excellent organisation of the Apec meeting, the biggest conference held so far in Brunei.

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