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APEC-ABAC (News Analysis)
BE MORE BUSINESSLIKE, ABAC TELLS APEC

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BANDAR SERI BEGAWAN, Nov 16 (Bernama) -- The Asia-Pacific business community has made a clarion call to the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) forum to be more businesslike, cut all rhetorics and get things moving on quickly to bolster the region's economy and bring its 21 diverse economies closer together.

This was the clear message at the APEC Business Advisory Council (ABAC)'s chief executive officers summit which ended yesterday where it was sounded out that action, not more rules, was needed to push APEC forward.

Perhaps, this was aptly put by Michael Yates, the chairman of Johnson & Johnson Asia Pacific, Singapore, who said: "We would certainly not advocate more rules, regulations and government targets. Rather, we favour making the current processes more effective and simplifying things,"

In what was clearly the private sector's frustration over impediments to economic cooperation, he said APEC programs have an impressive list of initiatives but the way it was being presented seemed like it was a "shopping list" rather than a focused program.

"I realise it keeps a lot of people very busy, and I do not want to disparage anyone's efforts. I also realise that simply reshuffling the words does not automatically make for better programs," said Yates.

Besides the APEC leaders, ABAC, the voice of the region's private sector, also took a swipe at the media which converged in Brunei to cover the APEC meetings.

They were clearly disgruntled that the focus by the media tended to be on trade liberalisation where issues such as trade facilitation and capacity building mattered most for the business sector.

At a press conference after a dialogue between ABAC and the leaders yesterday, its chairman, Timothy Ong from Brunei, said: "The media tend to focus on trade liberalisation when business facilitation is one of APEC's priorities and an important thing for the business community".

He said a survey had shown that business in the region had rated customs clearance and processes as more important than tariff issues.

It is a fact that, the issue of the launch of a new round of talks under the WTO in 2001, promoted strongly by the U.S., had taken centre stage during both the senior officials and Ministerial meeting and had graced the headlines of many newspapers.

Issues of capacity building, trade facilitation -- which many in the business community feel what APEC should be really all -- was deemed to be too technical and boring for pressmen who were rather looking for some colour to get the mood going.

While ABAC deserved some recognition over the work they have put in for APEC, the failure in trying to put across their achievements in simpler words compared with the powerful statements by politicians, have caused their efforts to go very much unnoticed.

Nevertheless, the discussions and presentations by prominent figures at the CEO Summit was worthwhile listening to and deserved some credit.

Among Malaysian businessmen attending the CEO Summit were Tan Sri Tajudin Ramli (Malaysia Airlines), Tan Sri Azman Hashim (Arab-Malaysian group), Mirzan Mahathir (Konsortium Logistik Bhd) and Tan Sri Zain Hashim (Lion Group).

The highlights of the CEO Summit were addresses on globalisation by President Bill Clinton of USA, President Jiang Zemin of China while

President Vladimir Putin of Russia and President Ricardo Lagos of Chile.

The topics ranged from problems, backlash and challenges of globalisation and how to confront them, corporate governance, deepening of the capital market, digital inclusion and whether APEC was relevant to business.

Speakers called on APEC to face up to the challenges ahead while businessmen themselves were told to help spread their know-how throughout the region.

The Sultan of Brunei in his opening address at the CEO Summit said that consultations and dialogue with the private sector has been an important part of the process so far.

However, he said much of the agenda was government-driven because APEC's work largely covered areas described as "government business," such as lowering tariffs, improving transparency of customs regimes and liberalising entry requirements for business travellers.

ABAC, meanwhile, made a call to APEC to stay on track towards progress on the Bogor goals with respect to trade and investment liberalisation and to give substance to capacity building.

Its report on "Facing Globalisation the APEC Way" contained 20 recommendations which included proposals to making business easier to conduct in the region, to build a stronger financial system and improve access to new opportunities through technological progress.

Only time will tell whether the 11-year APEC would tone down on its rhetorics and adhere to ABAC's call to be more action-oriented, raise cooperation among the members' diverse economies and in the process, enhance its relevancy in the new millenium contrary to what some are saying now. -- BERNAMA

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