

Multinational corporations tongue-tied over charges

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BRANDED villains by anti-globalisation protesters, many of the world's largest companies are casting around for a fitting response.

But they are finding it tough.

At violent protests in Seattle in 1999 and in Genoa last July, the behaviour of multinational companies was a rallying cry for a body of causes, from the plight of world's poor to destruction of the environment.

Many companies are worried the protests will get worse, especially if the attacks on Washington and New York hurt the global economy and pull the world into conflict, leading to greater unemployment and other cutbacks.

"We have got to work out how to deal with them," said Richard Sykes, group environmental adviser for Anglo-Dutch oil firm Shell International BV. "And to me, it's not obvious how you do it."

But the array of causes emblazoned on the banners of angry marchers — such as poor country debt, sweat-shop labour, human rights and the perceived hand of business in thwarting climate change action — has made it hard to forge coherent replies.

Executives tackled the topic at a recent meeting of the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, whose Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has voiced sympathy for issues raised by protesters.

Participants came from the coalition of 150 global firms in the council, a body styling itself as a leader in "eco-efficiency, innovation and responsible entrepreneurship".

"We think that the violence is totally crazy, however, we think that the protests are not all irrational," said Al Fry, a WBCSD programme manager. Reuters