

# Politics adds spice to Apec meeting

STAR

25 OCT 2001

COMMENTARY

By YAP LENG KUEN

THE 13th Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec), which was successfully hosted by China this year, turned out to be an unusual and "exciting" event in the rather weird context called terrorism.

What was originally slated to be an annual affair, with a difference as far as positive participation from Malaysia is concerned, became an event of intense international focus sparked off by the Sept 11 terror attacks on the US.

It did appear as if politics had overshadowed economics at the recent Apec meeting, but leaders and ministers alike were quick to point out that the two were intertwined. And the onus was on everyone present to ensure that the global economy kept chugging along despite the fear and uncertainty brought about by the acts of terror.

The highlight was the arrival of US President George W. Bush and his meetings with Apec leaders to explain the US retaliatory attacks against the need for counter-measures against terrorism.

Top-level meetings were held between Bush and Russian President Vladimir Putin, Chinese President Ziang Zemin and Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Countries like China gave their conditional support, in that US strikes on targets in Afghanistan must be accurate and there should be minimum impact on civilian lives. Malaysia and Indonesia, being Islamic countries, had their concerns especially with the fasting month fast approaching.

All through the Apec meetings, including the CEO Summit, Malaysia held its stand well. Dr Mahathir's speech at the CEO Summit was a favourite among the delegates present.

Not only did he, in his inimitable style, provide a refreshingly different way of viewing a problem, but his speech was well-researched and argued. Malaysian reporters were approached for copies of his speech and outside, as the CEOs were leaving, his name could be heard in their personal discussions.

Back in Malaysia, somebody also called up for a copy of that famous speech that talked of the perils of

falling into a "truth deficit" and for an "enlightened globalisation", as well as against massive accumulation of wealth at the expense of others. He also reminded the world of the power of persuasion as being ultimately superior to the power of the pack.

There were moments of applause and laughter as Dr Mahathir alluded to sayings of Deng Xiaopeng and Nelson Mandela.

Respect for Malaysia's stand on Afghanistan was evident, even though in the end it was not included in the leader's statement on counter-terrorism, which contained broad areas of action.

Nevertheless, the point was well taken, as explained by Dr Mahathir, in his meeting with Bush who even ended up agreeing that he would try to help resolve the Middle-East crisis.

The Americans, in their moment of pain, also presented their viewpoint to Dr Mahathir. At a later press conference which was open to foreign media, the Prime Minister said the deployment of US ground troops into Afghanistan would have limited impact, and that such action against terrorists was sometimes deemed necessary.

At that press conference, except for one or two needling questions, the foreign media appeared calm and sought Dr Mahathir's views on quite profound topics such as the definition of terrorism and globalisation.

Dr Mahathir came across as a well-read and experienced leader, described as a "senior statesman" by Ernest Bower, president of the US-Asean Business Council.

Businessmen present at the Apec meetings were concerned about the long-term stability of their businesses, and excited about the prospects of globalisation.

In particular, Malaysian businessmen see the rise of the Chinese economy as a wake-up call to many other Asean countries.

"So many changes are taking place, and China is not a place to

ignore. Competitiveness has become a serious subject of study for many firms," said Konsortium Logistik Bhd chairman Mirzan Mahathir when met at the CEO Summit.

Dr Mahathir, president and CEO of the Sapura group, also sees China as an exciting new market in which his group already has a presence.

Overall, long-term stability was what businessmen look for. Bower said. To this end, the work done in Apec in terms of capacity building, human resources development and preparations for the new information era may be deemed far-sighted and positive for regional cohesion even as countries compete for trade and investment.

And despite the ongoing competitiveness, Apec has set the ground for economic and technical co-operation so that perhaps, nobody gets left out of the race.