

23 SEP 2001

CHOGM

CHOGM IN BRISBANE "ON TRACK"

MELBOURNE, Sept 23 (Bernama) -- The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Brisbane next month remains on track despite organisers saying key nations have a chance to pull out at the last minute.

An official from the summit task force said countries had no deadline for committing to CHOGM, set to begin on Oct 6.

But no leaders have pulled out since the US terrorist attacks. As late as today, Canadian government officials are requesting timeslots for a media conference during the three-day meeting.

"There is never any deadline and technically they could pull out at the last minute," CHOGM spokesman Andrew Reynolds told the Australian Associated Press.

"I think it will go ahead," he said.

The Commonwealth forum, from Oct 6-9, will be one of the first major gatherings of world leaders since the Sept 11 suicide terrorist attacks on Washington and New York, which left more than 6,300 people dead or missing.

Up to 50 heads of state are scheduled to attend the summit, representing 1.7 billion people or almost 30 per cent of the world's population.

But Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said today the meeting could be postponed if enough key leaders abandoned it because of the terrorism crisis.

"I think there'd be a point where the CHOGM could be postponed, if a large number of prime ministers decide that they couldn't come because of the war on terrorism," Downer told Channel Nine Television.

Malaysia and Kenya are the only two countries not sending their leaders but will have deputies at the forum.

Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad and Kenyan President Daniel Arap Moi pulled out before the US attacks.

Bangladesh's government remains in caretaker mode with a government yet to be formed after a recent election and the country also may not send a leader.

Fiji is unlikely to gain approval from the Commonwealth Secretariat to attend with court action looming over the make-up of the country's cabinet following a recent election.

Queen Elizabeth is scheduled to attend as head of the Commonwealth and British consular officials insist her travel plans remain in place.

Downer said there was no hint yet that British Prime Minister Tony Blair would withdraw from the meeting as a result of his close involvement with the US war on terrorism.

"We don't have any indication that he's not going to come," Downer said.

"Other prime ministers and heads of government are still coming. So far, we haven't had any cancellations by heads of government as a result of the attack on the United States," he said.

Downer said the CHOGM would be a good opportunity to get a large number of countries together to focus on the issue.

"I don't think there's any doubt that terrorism will be a significant agenda item at CHOGM and, by the way, at the APEC (Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation) leaders' meeting in Shanghai later this month," he said.

-- BERNAMA

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