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Gaffe mars G-15 opening, officials deny lack of co-ordination

A GAFFE at the opening session of the 11th G-15 Summit yesterday triggered fresh speculation of a worsening working relationship between Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid and his Vice-President Megawati Sukarnoputri.

The embarrassing incident took place in the presence of G-15 heads of state and government at the Jakarta Convention Centre.

After delivering a brief speech to welcome the leaders and delegates, Abdurrahman, speaking in his capacity as the Chairman of the Group of G-15, told delegates that his statement at the session would be read by Megawati.

Subsequently, the master of ceremony invited Megawati to the rostrum but the Indonesian Vice-President remained in her seat.

A senior official rushed to ask the master of ceremony to clear the confusion and instead invited President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe to deliver a statement on behalf of Africa.

The confusion was good enough to create a commotion on the floor, especially among Indonesian journalists.

In an attempt to make up for the slip-up, Indonesian Foreign Minister Alwi Shihab spoke to Indonesian journalists to explain the situation and the transcription of the interview was distributed to the Press.

Alwi said Abdurrahman had thought that a later closed-door session which Megawati was scheduled to address had been incorporated in the opening session.

He denied there was no co-ordination between the two leaders.

"The President could be confused, thinking that the two sessions have been put together. We are not God, sometimes we get confused," said Alwi.

But many delegates felt that Indonesia's image has suffered at the Summit.

While Abdurrahman was opening the session, the House of Representatives (DPR) was meeting a few hundred metres away in Senayan, Central Jakarta, to call for a People's Consultative Assembly (MPR) special session to impeach him on the grounds that he failed to heed two motions of censure against him.

The proceedings were televised live by most television stations in Indonesia.

At the Press centre, attention was diverted from the G-15 Summit as journalists and delegates followed the DPR's proceedings on television.

Unlike at previous international forums hosted by Indonesia, a delegate said the Summit had become low key and lacked grandeur, reflecting the economic and political crisis gripping Indonesia.

Security was tight and journalists were asked to use the back entrance to enter the convention centre.

Due to security concerns, the organisers decided not to schedule a customary tour of the city.

The retreat of the heads of state and government was also held at a ballroom at Jakarta Hilton Hotel, where the leaders and delegates are staying.

After Mugabe's statement, Hugo Rafael Chavez Frias, the President of Venezuela, spoke on behalf of Latin America and the Caribbean countries.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad spoke on behalf of Asia. The Summit is attended by all 19 member countries.

The leaders are scheduled to issue a joint communique and Jakarta

Declaration today which will focus on information and communication technology, multilateral trade and the World Trade Organisation.
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