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Current political developments to dominate fourth Asem meeting

Zainul Arifin

THE concrete barricades hastily put around the Bella centre here where the fourth Asia-Europe Meeting will be held, and the stern but friendly wave of the Danish police officers, are turning out to be the norm rather than the exception at the international summit.

The meeting beginning Monday, which will be attended by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as well as 24 other European and Asian leaders, is living the reality of post-September 11.

Meetings now have turned out to be security nightmares, presumably to not only plan but also to navigate around.

This added dimension nevertheless speaks volumes about the state of the world now, and by extension, part of the agenda for Asem 4 has been made out.

Current political developments will likely dominate.

On top of the list would be the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the likely military action against Iraq, and international terrorism.

The presence at the summit of British Prime Minister Tony Blair, one of the biggest European supporters of a military campaign against Iraq and who is currently canvassing international support for the move, and recent events in Palestine, would see to it that the issues be pushed to the fore.

To be sure, members of the European Union, whose leaders are attending the summit, are themselves at odds with one another over their stance over these issues.

Nevertheless, observers are waiting to see if Asem 4 may see the EU presenting a common stand.

While Asem in itself is an informal summit, the presence of three UN Security Council members - Britain, France and China - as well as the European Union, and the collective voice of 10 Asian countries, have lent the meeting some political weight in these precarious times.

Dr Mahathir, as he is likely to do, may raise the issue of the current war on terrorism that is warped with mistrust, generalisation and inconsistencies that is likely do more damage than help the cause.

The current US-Britain dogged fervour to punish Iraq is just but an example, and he is likely to caution against that.

In the current environment, where flashpoints around the world are hastily coloured in the broad strokes of international terrorism, Asem has taken the added responsibility of bringing some level of sanity to international discourse.

The likely root causes of terrorism, be they political or economic in nature, would need to be identified and resolutions be sought.

Thus, it is natural that Asem extends beyond becoming a forum for economic co-operation but that it also incorporates political and pressing social issues.