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Message from Davos in NY - US will act as it sees fit

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TERRORISM, globalisation, digital divide, American foreign policy post September 11, the state of the world economy, financial volatility, crisis management and the role of Islam in the modern state are just some of the many issues being discussed at the World Economic Forum (WEF).

Being held away from the ski slopes in the Swiss Alps and away from Thomas Mann's Magic Mountain, the Forum has brought government, political, cultural, religious leaders and artists together under one roof. "In this room everyone is equal. Leave your official titles outside the door," one of the moderators told the panelists and participants - among them the President and senior Bush Administration officials. But even so, it was easier said than done.

Some chief executive officers (CEOs), used to numerous assistants and secretaries to do their bidding, found it difficult to take down notes.

"My writing is horrible," one senior American CEO said in protest when it was suggested that he summarised discussions at his table.

But by and large, the sessions are well attended with many workshops fully signed up ahead of time. But even so the best and most fruitful discussions are perhaps in the lobby of the Waldorf Astoria, the bar and in the corridors. Contacts and networking are among the attractions of the Forum, for which individuals pay nothing less than US\$6,000 (US\$1 = RM3.80) each while about 1,000 foremost companies in the world pay no less than US\$25,000 to participate.

Among the reasons why the decision makers and the movers and shakers of the world leave their secretaries and personal assistants as well as their plush limousines and cars to walk or take public transport, is that they are able to meet people in one place and in five, which otherwise would take them years and cost them much more. Where else can journalists expect to have breakfast with the King and Queen of Jordan, and Microsoft's Bill Gates, tea with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, sit at the same table with Michael Dell or President Alejandro Toledo of Peru.

Previously, the Forum trekked to Davos to discuss the new economy and the future of the Internet and the new divides including the digital divide. This time, the focus appears to be on how best to fight terrorism, chemical and biological weapons.

The Forum also provides an insight into future trends and thinking. The discussions on US foreign policy, post September 11, have provided an insight into the American thinking and views. Some concerns are being expressed that the US Administration was charting its own rules and will act as it sees fit.

Confrontations have hardly been subtle - no sooner had US Secretary of State Colin Powell finished on how to deal with "rogue regimes", Javier Solana, the former North Atlantic Treaty Organisation secretary general told him that his allies did not just want consultation but that they want a real vote. "For me, the coalition is a collective ambition to share responsibility, but to share also decision making," he said.

But there were even more blunt messages. Joseph Nye, dean of Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, summed up discussions in his session and said "For the Europeans the axis of evil was a bridge too far. There is a strong suspicion here that Bush is back to unilateralism, that after Afghanistan, America isn't especially interested in listening to the rest of the world".

The opportunity to question Powell and Paul O'Neill, US Treasury Secretary, directly have raised many more questions than they have been able to answer. The Chief Mufti of Bosnia, for example, wanted to know why there was no representation from the Muslim world in the United Nations (UN) Security Council, why is it that some one million Muslims are not directly involved in the decision-making process of the UN? The Mufti said he sympathised with the American people on the loss of life and property in the September 11 tragedy but pointed out that Bosnia was also the victim of terrorist attacks. Powell did not answer the question except to say that America had fought "on behalf of Muslims".

The distinction and the Clash of Civilisations between Islamic and Western values continues as the author of this now "famous" theory, Samuel Huntington of Harvard University continues to dwell on it while ignoring the conflicts between Christian groups such as those seen in Northern Ireland. Huntington's argument is that clashes between Protestants and Catholics do not have the same cosmic significance nor do they pose a potential threat to world peace. He also ignores, as many Americans do, of the division within the US - that of culture, social, religious as well as the digital divide. This exists between countries as it does within countries, even the most developed and the only super power in the world.

Economic development and the continued sluggish growth in the major developed countries do not help the poor developing countries. Neither does globalisation. Indeed a survey by the WEF showed that many citizens in the Group of Seven are sceptical of the benefits of globalisation for developing countries even as decision makers in these countries continue to push for the process among the poor.

In the US and other countries that are part of the coalition in the war against terrorism, perceptions of the effects of globalisation tended to be positive. Perceptions are generally negative in countries that have been badly hit by financial crisis and the global economic downturn.

The situation is not helped with the scenario of the world's largest economy. There is not much optimism as Stephen Roche of Morgan Stanley pointed out that the US economy is not going anywhere fast. He expects what he called a "double dip recession - a brief rebound followed by another drop after nascent increased production begins to again outpace demand". According to him, this phenomenon had characterised five of the last six recessions. This is no consolation for the poor countries that are dependent on the one major locomotive of the world economy.

Davos in New York provided much more drama on the streets than it offered answers to the many issues and concerns of the majority of the world's population and to the US' coalition partners and allies.

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