

Making Bangkok focus of summit

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BY DEVIRUPA MITRA

BANGKOK: When the presidential jets start landing at Don Muang airport here this weekend, it will be to a country that has gone to great lengths to make it welcoming – with streets cleared of stray dogs, beggars and activists and government holidays declared for four days to ease traffic congestion.

The leaders will certainly have a very easy schedule: two retreats, a working lunch and a gala dinner besides watching the Royal Barge procession.

The hard work will already have been done by their senior officials of Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec), who sat down on Tuesday to finalise the agenda for the 11th annual meeting.

Terrorism and trade are obviously the twin priorities for this year's meeting.

The 20 visiting leaders will be constantly reminded of the 21st century's greatest threat, from the time they get into their specially ordered BMW 7 series armoured cars that can resist a 15kg bomb blast, to the 20,000 strong security bubble which will enclose them during the two-day stay here.

From the Bali bombing to the Jakarta J.W.W. Marriot hotel car bomb attack, it has been a year fraught with terror for the Asia Pacific region, with governments trying to grapple with the complex subject of not only preventing terrorists from operating, but also choking off their support base.

For the last two years, the Apec summits have been held in the shadow of terrorist attacks. In 2001, the summit was held a month after Sept 11.

Last year, a couple of weeks after more than 200 people were killed in the Bali bomb blast, the Apec leaders assembled at Los Cabos, Mexico, on Oct 26.

Naturally, the agenda was largely shaped to reflect those events, with leaders issuing long summit statements on implementing counter-terrorism

measures, from stopping the flow of funds to adopting standings for biometric applications in entry and exit procedures.

One year later, Apec secretary-general Tej Bunnag said terror talks would dominate proceedings, with leaders set to "brainstorm" to find solutions.

As part of the 21 member countries accounting for half of the world's trade, Thailand is also interested in using the summit to try to place multilateral trade talks back on track after the failure of the Cancun round. There is also certain to be some friction over the US' demand that Asian nations adopt a more flexible currency-exchange regime.

The perennial issue of North Korea, which always inspires a feeling of *déjà vu* with its repetitive exhibits of brinkmanship is also expected to be discussed by the leaders.

Last year, Apec asked North Korea to give up its nuclear programmes but a year on the situation does not seem to have improved by much with Pyongyang keeping its trademark rhetoric on full blast on the resumption of its nuclear programme.

If the forthcoming summit seems to give more preference to style than substance, it does not seem to be bothering the chief host.

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra has been using the summit as a showcase of his managerial skills. His ambition appears to be to fill retiring Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's shoes as the region's new leading figure.

His government has spared no effort to ensure that Bangkok, or at least a small part of it, is the focus of the summit.

Thai commentators have exclaimed that the government may be converting Bangkok into a model Potemkin village, as stray dogs and beggars are cleaned out of the streets, but only in a few districts, overnight.

A couple of Cambodian beggars were

even flown out of the country in a special plane. Stray dogs from four districts here were similarly moved from the capital to the province of Sa Keaw, but they did not find much a welcome there.

Garbage bins have been removed from 39 roads to be used by Apec delegates, while bronze sculptures and instant fountains have been installed at various strategic locations.

In the run-up to the summit, there were several scare stories of surface-to-air missiles being smuggled into the city, as well as Jemaah Islamiyah leader Hambali confessing to targeting two five-star hotels here. Understandably, the security network is gargantuan, with a 10,000 strong security and another one hundred thousand people acting as special tipsters for suspicious activities. Several roads in the city centre will be closed during the summit, especially for the two days, when the city will host 20 heads of state.

And to prevent any embarrassment, the Thai government has banned all protests and demonstrations. It has even sent a blacklist of 500 activists from 100 countries to embassies and high commission to prevent them from entering Thailand.

This has already earned the ire of Thailand's National Human Rights Commission, which blasted the government for violating the United Nations convention on Human Rights, which gives the right to demonstrate in any country.

While activists are not welcome in the kingdom, it will be a royal welcome for the guests, who will return with several gifts, including Thai silk shirts, scarves and Royal Benjarong porcelain.

The Thai Prime Minister has claimed that "Apec will never be the same after Bangkok."

It will remain to be seen if Apec can become anything more than a photo event for 21 leaders in identical clothes. — Asia News Network