

Mahathir: Trade fairly

SUN 21 OCT 2003

BANGKOK: In his last major summit before retiring at the end of the month, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad took a swipe at rich nations for seeking to exploit the developing world through unfair trade deals.

He said global trade talks collapsed last month in Cancun, Mexico, because the agenda favoured wealthy countries.

"We are ready to be exploited, but we must be fairly exploited," he told a meeting of about 500 business leaders on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum.

Mahathir has frequently spoken of the need to guard against Malaysia slipping into economic re-colonisation. Yesterday, he compared the push for global free trade to the colonial era when rich countries used military force to secure trading rights from the developing world.

"Today, we cannot really send gunboats to ensure we can trade with the nation. So we have the WTO (World Trade Organisation) and an agenda of interest to the people who proposed the agenda, namely the rich countries," he said.

Apec leaders meeting here are expected to throw their weight behind measures to restart the so-called Doha round of WTO talks. Several members of Apec were among the developed and developing countries that clashed bitterly in Cancun over how to pull down trade barriers.

"We have been haggling over the agenda

for some time and we in the developing countries find that we are losing out," Mahathir said.

"The stress should be fair trade, rather than free trade. Fair trade can be free, but free trade can be unfair," he added.

"In fairer trade, our own weaknesses would be taken into consideration. We are not in a position to compete without some kind of advantage given to us."

Drawing the analogy of Malaysians playing American football, he said they should be given a handicap as in golf as they would not be able to match the Americans in a game which they had not played before.

He chided business leaders for seeking free access "to every corner of the globe".

"There is this thing called national pride," he said. "We would like to own something of our own. We would like to have a small automobile industry and be able to say, look this car was built by us."

Recalling history, he said the coming of globalisation was realised by the developed countries as the developing countries were too busy attending to their domestic economies to think about globalisation.

Hence, the agendas were prepared by the developed countries, which think of matters close to their hearts, that give them maximum results including free trade, reduced restrictions and obstructions, letting the efficient people win and doing things that benefit them (*see also Pages 2 and 10*). - Agencies