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G8-BUSINESS

BUSINESS ALMOST AT STANDSTILL IN GENEVA & LAUSANNE

By: Yong Soo Heong

GENEVA, May 31 (Bernama) -- For an outsider or first time visitor to Geneva or Lausanne this weekend, he or she may think that these two Swiss cities have fallen on hard times.

Thick reinforced wooden boards and steel shutters have fortified most of the high-end stores and banks in town, giving the impression that they have closed down because of poor business.

But the real reason for this "bankrupt look" is because of the demonstrations by anti-globalisation activists against the G8 Summit, which they have denounced as illegitimate in view of their stand that eight countries should not determine the affairs of the world.

The G8 Summit begins on Sunday at Evian on the French side of Lake Geneva and will be attended by leaders of the eight leading industrialised countries - the US, Japan, Britain, France, Germany, Italy, Canada and Russia.

This year's summit, which will last through Tuesday, is also known as the "Enlarged G8 Summit" as French President Jacques Chirac has also invited 13 leaders from developing countries, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, for discussions on the opening day.

G8 leaders are staying in Evian, a town noted for its fresh sparkling water, while other VIPs are staying in Lausanne, on the Swiss side of the lake.

The higher the snob appeal of the stores, the greater the level of barricades because of the fear of vandalism and looting. Store owners also take extra pains to cover the brand names of their merchandise. Hence, names like Louis Vuitton, Hermes, Christian Dior, Rolex, Baume & Mercier, Longines and Swatch have been completely blanked out by plastic sheets or steel covers.

Even the McDonald's outlet in the town square of Geneva, just a stone's throw from the railway station, is heavily barricaded in a pre-emptive move in anticipation of the strong anti-US stance among the anti-establishment demonstrators following the invasion into Iraq by the US and its allies.

Retailers in Lausanne, especially those with massive display windows, are extremely guarded this time. They do not want to be caught off guard like the demonstration on May 1 in Lausanne when several stores and a luxury hotel were vandalised and looted in a show of "civil disobedience" by only 500 demonstrators. With an estimated 300,000 demonstrators being touted for this weekend, they are not taking any chances.

While businesses have come to a complete halt for people who decided to close for this weekend, business has been brisk for those involved in the building and carpentry business as they attend to calls for the stores to be shuttered up completely.

Only those with dare have opened for business as life has to go on for them but they also take comfort that security has been beefed up in town.

"Business is very slow," says Sally Goh, a waitress from Ayer Molek, Melaka working at the Mai Thai Restaurant. "Many people have decided to stay home or leave town because of the demonstrations."

Many of the locals in Lausanne and Geneva have scurried away to be out of harm's way as they took advantage of the extended weekend because of the Ascension Day holiday on Thursday.

"Some parts of Geneva look like a ghost town," says Janine Bridewell, a housewife who lives in rue Carouge." It's not a pretty sight with many of

the shops closed."

While the demonstrators have not turned violent, they have certainly stamped their presence by scrawling graffiti all over most of the shop hoardings. Their anti-US and anti-globalisation disposition has elicited such messages like "Hate G Hate" in a pun on G8, "G8 is illegitimate" and "Bush Assassin."

How many demonstrators would lay siege on Geneva and Lausanne depends on whom one talks to. The more optimistic among the "mobilisers" or organisers put the number at around 300,000.

So far, more than 10,000 have showed up and the numbers are growing. It is not difficult to be tempted into joining in the demonstrations since the organisers provide free food, accommodation in tents and open air concerts in the heart of town and in the suburbs. As result, many young people from all over Europe and even as far as Japan and Australia have streamed into Geneva and Lausanne for the "fun and festivities."

"It's Woodstock re-visited" says one observer in reference to the mega music festival in the late 1960s.

On the eve of the summit, the demonstrators have planned to light huge bonfires around Lake Geneva as a sign of protest against G8, a move reminiscent of the ancient days when peasants in Europe rebelled against the rich.

But on a serious note, G8 security officials have gone to great lengths to strengthen security and prevent any eventuality, either from terrorists or demonstrators. They also want to avoid a repeat of the fatal shooting of an anti-globalisation activist by policemen two years at the 2001 G8 Summit in Genoa, Italy.

Altogether close to 20,000 police officers and soldiers from France, Switzerland and Germany have been mobilised to ensure tight security in Evian, Lausanne and Geneva.

Near the Beau-Rivage Palace Hotel opposite the boat quay in Lausanne where Dr Mahathir is staying with other VIP guests, security is extremely heavy - on land, at sea and in the air.

The heavily-armed security people mean business and people without proper accreditation are turned away. Business and life at the boat quay, tree-lined promenade and fancy cafes have come to almost a standstill, except for the swans, ducks and seagulls in the boat quay area. -- BERNAMA

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