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MAHATHIR-APEC

DR MAHATHIR, THE STAR ATTRACTION AT BANGKOK'S APEC

By: Arul Rajoo

BANGKOK, Oct 22 (Bernama) -- APEC was not just a gathering of 21 leaders from the Asia-Pacific region for it included the heads of some of the world's most powerful nations.

But it was one powerful leader, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad of Malaysia, who became the star attraction at this year's Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) informal summit who outshone everybody else.

President George Bush, perceived as the world's most powerful man now with the United States being the sole superpower, was here; so was President Vladimir Putin of Russia and China's Hu Jintao, the new president of the world's fastest growing economy.

Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was a gracious host and the prime mover in ensuring the overwhelming success of APEC but all these personalities failed to impress the the news-hardened media. It was the "outspoken," "combative" and "unrepentant" (his latest "accolade") Dr Mahathir who again stole the media limelight at Bangkok.

Even at the first APEC summit on Blake Island near Seattle in 1993, Dr Mahathir had already made waves -- not for any controversial remarks -- but oddly, for his absence, and this led then Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating to label him a recalcitrant.

Dr Mahathir and Keating later made up, but the global media knew only too well by then that only one of them -- the indomitable Malaysian leader -- was the one who could provide the punch and colour to their news stories even at drab meetings, or even when Dr Mahathir was conspicuously absent as inferences would be made as to why he chose to absent himself.

Media filings on APEC did not fail to mention Dr Mahathir as he stood out in the crowd of leaders when he voiced out his displeasure over attempts to include security issues in APEC and declared that the recent WTO meeting in Cancun was a minor victory for developing countries.

Minus the White House press corps who faithfully recorded what President Bush did and said, Dr Mahathir was obviously the most sought-after leader of the international media in Bangkok. The journalists knew very well that this could be the last time they could get some quotable quotes, as always, from the 78-year-old leader in his capacity as prime minister before he retires on Oct 31 after 22 years being at the helm.

Dr Mahathir, himself a prolific writer, never fails the media hungry for his hard-hitting statements, which may be sometimes controversial, and occasionally humorous, for they would help spruce up their news articles.

Not all leaders have this canny ability, not even George Bush, who is more known for his gaffes, as evidenced by his inability to get Myanmar's Aung San Syu Kyi's name right.

Dr Mahathir, who is now in Indonesia after the APEC gathering on Tuesday, will visit Timor Leste and Papua New Guinea after this. APEC was his last international forum before he hands over the reins of power to his deputy, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi.

According to Malaysian secretariat officials at the Peninsula Hotel here where the Prime Minister and his entourage had stayed, dozens of calls were received from media organisations each day as they wanted to know Dr Mahathir's schedule so that they could be present at his news conferences or photo opportunities.

"It was not just the Malaysian press who were looking for our PM, but

also major TV stations and wire agencies like CNN, NHK, AFP, Reuters and some Japanese newspapers," said one of the officials.

In fact, Japan's premier TV channel, NHK, has been following Dr Mahathir for the past two months and would continue to do so until his last day in office, including during his visit to the three countries.

Over the past week, he was the prime newsmaker, not just in Bangkok, but the world over.

Arriving here immediately after the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) Summit in Putrajaya, the world's media spotlight was on Dr Mahathir following his OIC speech which sparked off a global controversy over his remarks that "the Jews rule the world by proxy and they got others to fight and die for them."

Some Western media had distorted his speech and he was perceived as anti-Semitic although he also had harsh for his fellow Muslims in his OIC speech.

And to add fuel to the fire, a White House spokesman even said US President Bush had rebuked Dr Mahathir on the sidelines of the APEC informal leaders' meeting on Monday. But Dr Mahathir countered that there was no such rebuke; it was just that Bush had pulled him aside and explained "why he made such a strong statement against me (Dr Mahathir)" on the issue.

In referring to Dr Mahathir's OIC speech, an aide said, "The Prime Minister knew what he was saying. It was not written overnight. He started preparing the speech since June and there were many drafts and the final copy was all his."

And the international press, who had been "hunting" for him since he arrived here on Sunday, finally found their "shooting range" when Dr Mahathir held a press conference at the Queen Sirikit National Convention Centre here on Tuesday.

Held right after the customary press conference by the summit's chairman, Thaksin, and the next host, Ricardo Lagos Escobar, the President of Chile. the international media engaged Dr Mahathir for 45 minutes. Ranging from Reuters, AFP, Financial Times, The Guardian, Boston Globe, BBC, The Economist and many more, they had a field day and posed a total 24, mostly difficult, questions while about 20 television cameras and dozens of photographers kept "shooting" at him.

Questions ranged from the World Trade Organisation, Jews, Myanmar, Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim, his retirement plans, his relationship with "Deputy Sheriff Australia" and his personal opinion of Bush. As usual, Dr Mahathir was in his element, providing his trademark witty and wily responses.

A Malaysian journalist, currently with a foreign wire agency, said he would really miss Dr Mahathir at international forums when he stepped down as prime minister.

"He adds colour to meetings. And certainly he gives good copies for us. I am proud to be a Malaysian because of what he stands for," said the veteran journalist.

In 10 days' time, Dr Mahathir may not be occupying Malaysia' hot seat but he is likely to remain busy.

"He may want to have some rest after a tiring public life," said his aide.

The aide added, "He may not be the prime minister anymore but I am sure he will be kept busy as there are many invitations for him to attend seminars, conferences and talks almost every week, locally and also overseas."

But for most, if not all, media practitioners, both international and local, they will certainly miss the colourful episodes, run-ins and great

times they had with the one and only Dr Mahathir as prime minister over the past 22 years.

-- BERNAMA

AR MR SHY