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Focus should be on trade issues

TERRORISM threatens to overshadow trade at the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec) Summit in Bangkok because US President George W. Bush has signalled his intention to put the so-called war on terror at its centre-stage. The United States is proposing that Apec members adopt counter-terrorism measures to block the movement of weapons, such as Man-Portable Air Defence Systems (Manpad) and surface-to-air missiles, used by terrorists, and to implement steps to respond to bio-terrorism.

This is an unwelcome development for the forum of 21 countries which was developed to address economic issues in the Asia-Pacific region. The forum should not be turned into a security conference. Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has urged that it return to its original objectives, for which much remains to be done. As International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz said, political and security issues should not be brought into the already heavy Apec agenda. There are other avenues to address such concerns. "We should not overload Apec with new issues that are beyond our capacity to manage well, or risk spreading our capacity too thin," she pointed out. Apec would then be unable to do justice to the core issues such as trade and investment liberalisation, e-commerce, small-and-medium industry development, business mobility, and economic research.

Apec, indeed, has enough on its plate right now, more than it can chew, as Rafidah pointed out. If at all the issue of terrorism is brought into the picture, Apec should look at its impact on trade rather than meet the domestic considerations of economies like the US. Terrorism is Bush's agenda. It should not be allowed to become Apec's.

Neither should it serve the free trade agenda of the developed economies for the further liberalisation of the developing economies. There is no need to speed up the time-frame for the lowering of trade barriers set in the 1994 Bogor Goals. Moreover, as Rafidah pointed out, the timetable is not binding. "If you could achieve it, fine. If you couldn't for whatever reason, nobody was going to penalise you and you were not going to be worse off." Consensus, not binding rules, should remain the Apec approach to decision-making.