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PM: Return to original aims (HL)

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DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, attending the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation Summit for the last time as Prime Minister, has expressed hope that the 14-year-old organisation will return to its original objectives.

He said he would use the Bangkok meet, which starts today, to again emphasise Malaysia's stand on the need for Apec to concentrate on fair and equitable trade and get away from pure political and security matters.

For this reason, he added, Malaysia was concentrating more on the Asean and Asean+3 fora.

Speaking to Malaysian journalists in his hotel suite yesterday, Dr Mahathir said he would use his last Apec meeting to try to bring it back to its original *raison d'etre*.

Apec, which groups 21 economies of the Asia-Pacific region, was set up in 1989 as the primary regional vehicle for promoting open trade and practical economic and technical co-operation.

However, several members, including Malaysia, had noted that Apec was losing its focus, enlarging its work portfolio to include security, military and political matters.

Dr Mahathir said while Malaysia could not ignore the existence of Apec, the country placed more importance on Asean and Asean+3.

"Apec is a fact that we cannot ignore. But since it brings in countries which are not evenly developed, there is a tendency for the agenda of the stronger countries to be inserted into Apec.

"While we accept that Apec *de facto* exists and we have to deal with it, what we feel is more important is Asean and Asean+3," he said.

After his arrival in Bangkok in the morning, the Prime Minister joined leaders of the seven Asean countries in Apec at a working luncheon hosted by Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra.

Asked whether there were many curious questions since he arrived here about his speech on Thursday at the Organisation of the Islamic Conference Summit in Putrajaya, he said there were.

"I had the opportunity to explain to Asean members at lunch today and also to American businessmen at the afternoon forum. They seemed to understand as I told them to read the whole speech and not to take the statement out of context," he added.

Dr Mahathir's thought-provoking speech was interpreted by some as being anti-Semitic and inflammatory.

The Prime Minister said he explained to the delegates at the two meetings today that the OIC is not about condemning other people. It is about how Muslim countries can improve themselves. "I told them it is not true at all that I am anti-Semitic. By and large, they understand."