

Abdullah: Get Doha Round back on track

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THE Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec) grouping is in danger of losing its economic and trade focus if more security issues keep on being raised at its annual leaders' summits, the prime minister said yesterday.

"I feel strongly that the Apec meeting should focus on trade as Apec is a meeting of economic leaders," Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi told a news conference here after the close of a two-day summit of Apec leaders.

"If we are going to have more and more difficult issues coming up that will occupy our attention, and because of that more pages of communiqués are devoted to them, then there is a danger we might be derailed from our economic objective," he said.

This was not the case at this Apec summit in Hanoi as some security issues which affected trade needed to be discussed among the leaders to ensure they did not impede economic co-operation, he added.

However, in the future, if the North Korea nuclear issue, for example, was not resolved and other fresh security issues came up, then it could become a problem for the regional grouping. The proper forum for resolving the North Korea issue was the United Nations Security Council, he said.

The 21 Apec leaders issued a Hanoi Declaration at the end of their summit which did not say anything on the danger posed by North Korea's nuclear programme, as was widely expected and sought by the US.

President George W. Bush had been lobbying hard on the sidelines of the summit with other Apec big power members, such as China, Russia, Japan and South Korea, to include a statement by the regional grouping taking Pyongyang to task in the declaration.

But a majority of Apec members, wary of being accused of interfering in other nations'

affairs, instead allowed for a verbal statement to be read within closed doors, calling on North Korea to abide by UN rules and give up its nuclear ambitions, officials said.

Apec leaders did not issue any statement on North Korea because some of the big power Apec nations did not want to be party to any statement that least reflected their position.

The most significant point in the Hanoi Declaration was the leaders' reaffirmation of solid support for the resumption of the Doha Round of World Trade Organisation (WTO) free trade talks which collapsed in July.

They said it was a top priority for Apec.

Apec, established in 1989, accounts for nearly 40 per cent of the world's population and about half of global trade.

Among the major Apec players engaged in the failed Doha Round of trade talks are the US, Japan, Australia and Malaysia.

The European Union and India are the other major non-Apec countries involved in the negotiations which failed after disagreement on the level of reduction of farm subsidies and tariffs.

"The consequences of the failure of the Doha Round would be too grave for our economies and for the global multilateral trading system," the declaration said.

"We should, therefore, spare no efforts to break the current deadlocks and achieve an ambitious and overall balanced outcome of the Round."

WTO director-general Pascal Lamy came to Hanoi to meet Apec trade ministers in the middle of last week and managed to coax them into agreeing to reignite the talks.

Abdullah said that Apec economic officials should now concentrate on getting the Doha Round back on track as soon as possible.

Malaysia is keen on a new global free trade accord as it is a trading nation which needs improved market access and removal of trade barriers to continue to prosper economically.

A proposal by the US and Singapore to create an Asia Pacific-wide regional free trade area, dubbed as the Free Trade Area of the Asia Pacific (FTAAP), as an alternative to the

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