

Threat to Apec free trade

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HANOI: The Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) forum is in danger of losing focus as more and more political and security issues are being brought under its ambit.

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who expressed this concern at the end of this year's Apec Leaders Summit here yesterday, said Malaysia wanted the grouping to keep to its original focus of promoting free-flow trade in the region.

"If an increasing number of political issues keep cropping up and more pages of communiqués are devoted to these things, then there is a danger that we might be derailed from the economic objectives," the Prime Minister told Malaysian and foreign journalists after the summit.

He said he was not implying that such a situation had already arrived but it appeared that it could happen in the future.

"If the existing issues are not resolved, more issues will be raised and we will have to deal with them," he said, adding that Apec should, however, remain free to discuss matters to enhance security aspects in the context of economic cooperation.

The Prime Minister also said that it would be wrong to outright dismiss security issues like terrorism in the region, if most member economies were not subject to any attack.

"Other countries will also have to manage these issues," he said.

On the issue of North Korea's nuclear programmes, which was discussed heavily on the

sidelines of the summit by the leaders of United States, China, Japan, South Korea and Russia, he said the proper forum to raise this was the United Nations Security Council.

As such, he said the "verbal

statement" expressing their "strong concern" rather than a written document on the matter by the leaders was appropriate.

In their statement on the Hanoi Declaration earlier, the 21 Apec leaders, whose countries account

for more than half of global trade, said their top priority was to help revive the Doha round of World Trade Organisation talks, which have been stalled since July.

The leaders endorsed an action plan, which serves as the foundation

for Apec's economic and trade cooperation over the next 15 years.

The leaders also endorsed recommendations to reform Apec to make the forum more vibrant, dynamic and effective.