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Intense but fruitful summit

Israel's aggression against Gaza and territorial disputes hog the headlines but much of Asean's agenda was achieved in the three long days of meetings.

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As he got up after his press conference with the Malaysian media before departing home from Phnom Penh, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak candidly exclaimed: "Wah! Exhausted! If anyone thinks that this is a joy ride, you better tell the people at home."

"Pagi sampai malam tiga hari berturut turut, tak berhenti langsung! (From morning to night for three days in a row, Non-stop)". He quipped, still looking dapper despite going through another long day of meetings with Asean and world leaders, including from China, India, the United States and Japan.

Asean summits have always had a punishing schedule for those participating in the meetings. Meetings always overrun the scheduled time, causing a pyramid effect on other meetings.

But as a seasoned Asean summit attendee from Malaysia puts it, "Asean meetings will always be important as the cornerstone of a country's foreign policy".

Asean meetings can be slow affairs but can get fairly "exciting" when there is a crisis brewing - be it political or foreign affairs.

It was no different at this 21st Asean Summit and Related Summits at the Cambodian capital this week where overlapping territorial claims among several of the participating countries and the attacks by Israel against the Palestinians grabbed the headlines.

Sadly, these caused many to ignore the milestones and major developments that were achieved at this summit.

One of these was the adoption of the Asean Human Rights Declaration, which despite being panned for purportedly not meeting international standards, was hailed by leaders, including Najib, who felt it had points which were better than the



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-DATUK SERI NAJIB TUN RAZAK

universal declaration of human rights.

Another important initiative is the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) involving Asean 10 and its FTA partners namely China, Japan, South Korea, India, Australia and New Zealand.

The RCEP is one of the most ambitious regional economic integration initiatives in Asia.

It will bring together the leading economies in Asia with a population of 3.4 billion people with a combined GDP of US\$17 trillion.

Despite these achievements, the territorial dispute in the South China Sea could not be ignored.

Najib, for the first time, spoke extensively on it to the media to state Malaysia's stand but in a measured tone where he repeatedly said that Malaysia wanted a peaceful solution while mindful of opinions that the South China Sea could potentially be a flashpoint.

"One of the challenges will be to ensure there is continued peace and stability in our part of the world."

"The first approach will be whenever China is ready to discuss the Code of Conduct. That will be an important framework and after that only, hopefully, there will be the



Friendly meet:
Najib and Obama shaking hands after the Trans-Pacific Partnership Meeting at the Peace Palace in Phnom Penh. - Bernama

beginning of the more complex part of negotiations which is settlement of the areas concern," said the Malaysian leader, adding that all leaders agreed for a peaceful resolution.

A senior Malaysian official said Najib did well in putting forward his views, including that of Israeli military aggression in the Gaza Strip.

"With (just re-elected US President) Barack Obama's presence in the room, the Prime Minister articulated well Malaysia's position and that got the US president to listen to him," said the official.

It was also during the Asean-US summit that Najib spoke of the moderation approach in managing crises, citing the example of Malaysia's role in helping to achieve peace in Southern Philippines which was concurred by Obama who also spoke at length on moderation.

Despite reports of tensions and disagreements during the meeting between the Philippines and host Cambodia, which was accused of pandering to China, Najib said the atmosphere was "quite calm".

A Malaysian official agreed with Najib, saying he noticed that among the leaders there were a lot of sensible and cool heads.

"This shows that Asean is more mature to manage issues or challenges. This can only further strengthen Asean centrality, a fact accepted and supported by other countries," he said.

Brunei takes over the Asean chairmanship next year. It is a claimant country to the South China Sea and will be closely watched on how it handles the issue.