

Can something like this happen here?

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THE nightmare of violence that rocked Hong Kong last week has given rise to a sense of foreboding that Singapore could face the same next September.

About 16,000 of the world's top money men and business leaders will congregate here from Sept 12 to 20 for the annual International Monetary Fund-World Bank meetings.

Mayhem at such meetings of rich and poor nations seems inevitable. The latest reminder were the scenes of clashes between militant South Korean farmers and Hong Kong police at last week's World Trade Organisation ministerial meetings. More than 1,000 protesters were arrested and about 200 protesters and police officers injured.

Can Singapore handle such battle-hardened protesters?

Security experts and activist groups believe measures can be taken to keep the situation under control, even prevent it.

For one, Singapore should suss out the troublemakers. Hong Kong apparently has a dossier of 300 key troublemakers from around the world.

But the most effective measure would be to stop activists with a history of violent protests from even setting foot in Singapore.

'The Singapore Government may wish to consider taking a harder line on granting visas to people with criminal records or a history of violence,' said Mr Andrew Work, executive director of the Lion Rock Institute in Hong Kong, which supports free trade.

Hong Kong was not strict in granting such entry permits, he added.

However, its police went to South Korea for weeks of training from their Korean counterparts, who are highly skilled and experienced in dealing with violent street protests.

Singapore should also do the same and take lessons from others, such as the United States and Italy, said Mr Richard Isaacs, senior vice-president of New York-based vulnerability management firm The Lubrinco Group, which provides global protective services for the rich, famous and powerful.

The US cities of Philadelphia and New York have held large-scale meetings without incident. However, Seattle in the US and Genoa in Italy can give tips on what not to do.

The Seattle authorities had to declare a state of emergency and impose curfews after rioters looted shops during the 1999 WTO meetings. Italian police shot dead one protester during clashes at the Group of Eight Summit in Genoa in 2001.

The Singapore organizers, however, appear unconvinced that public order will be under siege during the IMF-World Bank meetings.

Calling themselves the Singapore 2006 Organizing Committee, its spokesman noted that accredited civil society organizations 'generally have a good track record of constructive behavior' at past IMF-World Bank meetings.

Every three years, the IMF-World Bank holds its annual meetings outside the US.

At the 2000 meetings in Prague in the Czech Republic, protesters swarmed the venue. Teargas was used and the meetings wrapped up a day early although the organisers denied the protesters were the reason for it.

However, the 2003 meetings in Dubai passed without incident.

Mr Kishore Mahbubani, former ambassador to the United Nations and now dean of the Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy, believes the benefits of hosting the meetings far outweigh the costs.

He said: 'It creates a stronger impression of Singapore among global policymakers who would all be visiting and networking during the meetings and dinners.'

During the nine days of meetings, Singapore expects to add \$40 million to its coffers, said the Singapore Tourism Board.

However, businesses in Suntec City, where the meetings will be held, worry that the tight security could keep customers away.

They saw what happened at the Marina Bay area in July during the International Olympic Council meeting. Takings went down as shoppers stayed away.

ARA Trust Management (Suntec), which owns and manages the Suntec City mall, is taking preventive steps.

Said its chief executive Yeo See Kiat: 'We've been very candid with the authorities and are working very closely with them to ensure that security is tight. But they also recognize that business must go on.'