

By
**CHEONG
MEI SUI**

IT WILL be an exercise in diplomacy rather than a business conference for Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad who leaves tomorrow for Suva, Fiji, to attend the Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting (CHOGRM).

The Prime Minister has made it clear that he would not be too keen to be at the meeting but for the opportunity to meet the leaders of the small countries in the Asia-Pacific region.

Apart from the heavyweights — Australia, New Zealand and India — and Malaysia and Singapore, the rest of the 17 members attending the five-day conference are small, struggling developing nations. The Maldives is the latest addition to the group.

Dr. Mahathir, who has redefined the country's foreign policy priorities, said recently that the 45-member Commonwealth is languishing.

Emphasis

The Premier who did not attend last September's Melbourne Commonwealth Summit, is of the view that such conferences are not beneficial.

Malaysia, he says, no longer depends entirely on the strength and assistance of the Commonwealth nations. The pattern of trade "has changed to the extent

For stronger bond with the S. Pacific

NST 11 OCT 1992

course of a visit to Fiji, Tonga and Western Samoa.

As far as Malaysian Prime Ministers go, Dr. Mahathir is the trail blazer. Having started, it

is logical that he will want to buttress the bilateral approaches that he has made and to demonstrate his empathy with these small nations.

In his policy speech at the opening of the Umno General Assembly on Sept. 10, Dr. Mahathir said: "We feel that social responsibility is not confined to internal problems but involves foreign relations as well.

"As in a nation where the rich need to be taxed so that assistance can be given to the poor, in the international community, too, the rich should help the poor."

nations in the South Pacific have never failed to support Malaysia and other Asean countries in the United Nations. Similarly, the Asean countries have always given them support in the decolonisation process.

It was noted that these South Pacific nations and Malaysia were, in some cases, competing for the same access to places of training in Australia and New Zealand.

Malaysia, being in a stronger position, did not want to compete. In view of the fact that some of the positions of the South Pacific nations are being taken up by Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur is offering assistance to them in areas where the technologies and expertise are not found in Australia and New

Wellington, especially, which plays a bigger role in the region, feels that its friendship with the indigenous communities is being undermined.

Dr. Mahathir will, undoubtedly, take the opportunity of the meeting in Fiji to assure Australia and New Zealand that there is nothing sinister about Kuala Lumpur wanting to be close to the South Pacific nations.

There will be ample opportunity for informal talks between the leaders in Fiji, especially at the scheduled three-day "retreat" from Oct. 16 at the Pacific Harbour, 40 km from Suva, the conference venue.

The leaders, meeting in an atmosphere of old camaraderie within the

that Commonwealth preference no longer exists and the bulk of our trade is with non-Commonwealth nations."

(Since Britain, the founder of the Commonwealth, joined the European Economic Community in 1973, Malaysian primary commodities and manufactured goods which used to enjoy preference, have been subject to high import duty.)

However, Malaysia is aware of the potential of the Commonwealth, especially as a forum for newly-independent small nations. It will, therefore, remain a member and play a role in their development.

The accent of Dr. Mahathir's trip to Fiji is on making friends with the smaller countries, with particular emphasis on the island nations in the South Pacific. It will be more meaningful to talk about what Malaysia and these nations can do together bilaterally than what can be achieved in CHOGRM.

With the majority of the participants being from the South Pacific area, the CHOGRM meeting serves the purpose of a launching pad for developing relations with the smaller countries in the region.

Dr. Mahathir's presence in Suva is also an expression of his esteem for his Fijian counterpart, Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, whom he met in June in the

Being a small nation itself and realistic, Malaysia started a modest \$10 million technical assistance programme in 1980 to help other countries, especially the newly-independent and developing nations, in areas where it has the experience and expertise.

The project includes providing scholarships and fellowships for studies in Malaysian universities and other training institutions.

Papua New Guinea and other South Pacific nations like Western Samoa, Kiribati, Cook Islands, Tonga and Fiji are increasingly responding to the offer of assistance from Malaysia.

For instance, Western Samoa has asked for a Malaysian officer from the Economic Planning Unit to assist in setting up a similar department.

In 1978 Malaysia made an effort to find out what type of policy should be evolved for the South Pacific.

There are many good reasons why Dr. Mahathir's administration decided to adopt a clear-cut policy and to establish a full mission in Fiji for this strategic part of the globe.

The Malaysian High Commissioner who took up his post in Suva in the earlier part of this year, looks after Tonga, Western Samoa, Kiribati and Tuvalu. Previously these countries were covered by the Malaysian mission in Wellington.

The Commonwealth

Zealand.

It, therefore, creates the "mutuality" which will reduce possible tension between these nations and their big neighbours and between Malaysia and these developed nations.

This "cycle" in creating a harmonious relationship contributes to strengthening national resilience for all, which is vital in the strategic sense.

The South Pacific island nations, handicapped by their size and physical isolation, are largely dependent on assistance from Australia and New Zealand for their survival and progress.

This creates the difficulty for these nations that they are then entirely dominated by two very developed nations.

They, however, have little option. Being Western and free enterprise oriented, they are reluctant to be close to the Russians and the Chinese. Soviet efforts to get a foothold in the region are well-known.

It is precisely because of the understanding of the position of these South Pacific nations that Malaysia has taken the lead to make friends with them so that they will not feel they are floating in the vast Pacific Ocean by themselves. Other Asean countries now share this view.

Inevitably, this runs into some difficulties with the Australians and the New Zealanders.

association of Commonwealth countries, have the advantage of not only hearing what the other has to say across the conference table but also of probing his mind.

Dr. Mahathir told a conference in Bali on *Asia-Pacific in the 1980s* in January 1980 that if there was to be co-operation among countries of the Pacific region, then the appalling ignorance among the nations within the area must be overcome.

He quoted the Malay saying: *Tak kenal maka tak cinta* (You can only appreciate a person whom you know).