

Strident call against Pretoria wins applause Mahathir leads the charge

**CHOGM
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NASSAU (Bahamas)

MUNIR MAJID reports from NASSAU, Thursday

THE scene is set. Apartheid is the issue. One after another the six Prime Ministers who spoke at the opening ceremony of the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting here yesterday afternoon identified the need to take clear action against the racist South African regime, including economic sanctions.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad led the charge with a blunt, forceful speech which was punctuated by frequent applause from the dignitaries and officials at the colourful opening ceremony.

Dr Mahathir thundered: "If sanctions can help destroy a despicable policy like apartheid, then sanctions must be applied and they must

be applied by those who can hurt most; by the countries with the biggest economic clout. Failure to do so would mean hypocrisy on the part of these countries and that will rub off on the Commonwealth."

He characterised the South African apartheid issue as the most important reason "for this present meeting of the Commonwealth."

Before him, Sir Lynden Pindling, Prime Minister of the Bahamas, in his welcoming address, Prime Ministers Brian Mulroney of Canada, Rajiv Gandhi of India, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, and afterwards Australian Premier Robert Hawke had all joined in a stirring chorus calling for the Commonwealth to stand true to its principles by acting on them against South Africa.

British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher looked isolated among the record 41 heads of Governments on stage not because she was the only woman. Britain opposes economic sanctions against South Africa, a lone voice against the feeling, even the fury, of the rest of the Commonwealth.

Up to the last moments before the opening of the conference the British were still sticking to their guns. Zimbabwe Prime Minister Robert Mugabe told the *New Straits Times* that he, only the day before, received a message from Mrs Thatcher saying that Britain remained firmly opposed to economic sanctions against South Africa.

In his speech Dr Mahathir had, in an obvious reference to Britain, said "...those whose application of sanctions is likely to bring South Africa to its knees have any number of arguments why they should not apply sanctions.

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"Restrictions on imports from poor countries, restrictions which cause real human suffering in these small States are all right. But not sanctions against South Africa. The blacks would suffer. That is the excuse."

To thunderous applause, he added: "The fact is that the blacks are already suffering."

At the end of his speech the Prime Minister warned: "If the Commonwealth refuses to do something definite, then the club should cease to pretend. It should admit that it really cannot contribute towards solving the problems faced by its members, if not the world."

Indeed, earlier on, Dr Mahathir had sketched Malaysia's dissatisfaction with the Commonwealth's failure to live up to its promise, its inability to achieve tangible and meaningful results for its members.

The other Prime Ministers who spoke, although they did not quite put the Commonwealth on the line, emphasised that the Commonwealth must take action against South Africa, strongly implying that the success or failure of the Nassau Summit depended on this issue.

India's Rajiv Gandhi called for nothing short of comprehensive sanctions. Sir Lynden Pindling of the Bahamas, in assailing South Africa's intransigent and defiant stand, said: "There should be no doubt what

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the collective Commonwealth position is regarding South Africa."

Mr Robert Hawke called for further effective economic sanctions to strengthen the countervailing power against South Africa's repressive force, while Mr Brian Mulroney underlined that the effectiveness of the Commonwealth will be judged "against its stand on current issues."

Mr Robert Mugabe was strangely the most reticent on the issue, although he told the *New Straits Times* afterwards that the Zimbabwean position was well-known. He did not need to amplify, especially as the other Prime Ministers were already going to come out strong.

Zimbabwe's strong support for sanctions will be made clear during the course of the conference, he said.

The Commonwealth Prime Ministers will discuss the apartheid issue further this afternoon, in a consideration to be led by Zambia's Kenneth Kaunda, with Mr Robert Hawke responding.

Discussions

After a day of discussions on international economic issues tomorrow (with Mr Mulroney and Dr Mahathir as the main speakers), the leaders will retire to their weekend retreat, before considering the problems of small States on Monday. The conference ends on Tuesday.

It is during the weekend retreat that the moves to persuade Mrs Thatcher will be on. The British are already talking of something in between the call for sanctions and Britain's opposition to them.

Australian Prime Minister Robert Hawke talked to the *New Straits Times* after yesterday's opening ceremony about a time table of escalating pressure against South Africa not immediately involving economic sanctions although they will be identified as a measure somewhere along the line.

He also made reference to the possible establishment of a contact group comprising eminent Commonwealth, even non-Commonwealth, statesmen to drive some sense into the Pretoria regime and to get the South Africans to face up to the inevitable — full political and civil rights for the blacks and other non-white races.

There may well be some compromise yet as Commonwealth leaders seek to make it possible for Mrs Thatcher to come along and save the Commonwealth from perhaps irreparable damage.