

Dr M to head South panel

By VONG NYAM MING

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been appointed chairman of a steering committee to push the setting up of the much-debated South Commission. Accepting the nomination at the final session of the South-South conference in Kuala Lumpur yesterday, Dr Mahathir emphasised the practical over the rhetorical.

"We should be very clear as to what to do and the direction of the Commission (for the South).

"We'll have to be very practical, clear and specific. The South has a large number of countries. There are different ideologies. We need practical solutions. Don't get carried away by rhetoric, empty discussions and committees which are excuses for travelling all over the world looking for a solution in remote places," he warned.

"The problem is very clear and we've to tackle the problem," he said, referring to the world crash in commodity earnings.

Malaysia will make a contribution toward the expenses for the setting up of the steering committee but it will not be very big because of the worldwide commodity slump, the Prime Minister said.

Dr Mahathir said that the steering committee will only have a short life span and a rigid timetable so that the South Commission will be set

up in the shortest time before the Harare meeting of the Group of 77 next May.

Speaking at a news conference later, he said it is a measure of success of the conference that participants did not waste time on rhetoric.

"The tone of the meeting was quite different from the seven countries meeting in Tokyo. We don't think the economy of the world is all that good," he said.

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He said that the steering committee will be formed in consultation with the Third World Foundation and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), the co-organisers of the South-South conference.

The steering committee and the Commission will basically have a non-governmental-organisation make-up. He said:

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"We're all sitting not as members of the government but as individuals, and we should keep it that way.

"We would like the support of as many countries as possible and some countries will be contributing (toward the expenses of the South Commission) and we can't get too many countries (because) we won't get anywhere," he said.

The steering committee will concentrate on

the possible things. Even though there may only be a few groups of a few countries, it will still be South-South cooperation, he said.

"We don't like a confrontation with the North," he said, answering a question. "It's not the time and if the people in the North want to work with us, that's good."

Asked if the 22 countries attending the conference can be said to be representative of the 120 countries of the South, he said that 22 out of 120 attending is itself quite an achievement. Besides, the invitations were not on a country by country basis but based on the keenness in South-South relations.

Also at the news conference, Commonwealth Secretary-General Sir Shridath Ramphal said that Malaysia's approaches to development hold lessons for many countries in the Third World who have reached middle-income status and who are now threatened by external factors.