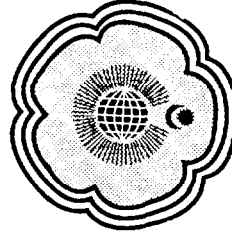


A STRONGER HAND



By Nizam Mohamed

KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. — Malaysia believes that the recently-ended CHOGM has strengthened its hand at regional and international forums — and not merely by virtue of its position as chairman of the summit.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad explains it this way: "Most of the member countries did not really know what we were about. When we spoke at meetings they thought of us as just a developing country. They did not know how far we have gone, they did not know our background, what we are about.

"Many of the delegates told me how surprised they were at our progress. Now they know us. When we speak now they know where we are from. I believe we will get a better

hearing from now."

The Prime Minister, sharing his thoughts with a group of Malaysian journalists hours after the closing ceremony yesterday, was obviously pleased with the outcome of the week-long meeting.

And according to the other leaders, he had cause to be happy. Singapore Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, joining the chorus of praise for the summit, called it "one of the more successful conferences" that he had attended.

He considers Dr Mahathir a good chairman. "He gave everyone a fair chance to state his position and dissent. All the leaders felt they had a fair go at setting out their views," he said.

"I think everyone is leaving satisfied and so am I," Mr Lee was quoted as telling Singapore reporters before heading for home.

Malaysian and foreign officials also gave Dr Mahathir credit for "saving a bad situation and putting

the meeting on course."

They were referring to the morning executive meeting on Monday, when Australia's Bob Hawke and Canada's Brian Mulroney lambasted Mrs Margaret Thatcher for coming out with a statement of her own on South Africa the same day that she and the rest had endorsed the official stance.

A British official said that Mrs Thatcher replied "in a firm but even tone" but the others gave a far different version.

They said that Mrs Thatcher was "more agitated than a lot of people remember her as, being in a very long time."

"She kept saying that she was appalled (at being asked to explain her action). Her pitch was getting higher and higher, and Mr Hawke and Mr Mulroney were getting angrier and angrier; their faces were red like lobster," an official said.

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Dr M spoke more on the environment

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He said that many other delegates, especially the African leaders, were so angry "they couldn't sit still. They couldn't wait their turn to blast her."

The officials said that Dr Mahathir saw what was happening and steered the meeting towards discussion of economic issues.

Some delegates had wanted a special session to discuss the British statement, but Dr Mahathir saw no point in it, a Malaysian official said.

"There was a lot of unfinished business. The British statement took nothing away from the official summit document, and a special session (to discuss Mrs Thatcher's action) would not have helped. The Iron Lady is well named," he added.

Malaysia's flexibility in the discussion of some of the issues, especially the environment, was also a surprise to the delegates.

Some officials felt that India was trying to steal the thunder from Malaysia, which initiated the declaration on the environment and drew up the original draft.

The Malaysians suggested the setting up of a fund for the programme of action, but was not insisting on it, while the British felt that the existing mechanisms pro-

vided by international bodies would suffice.

India was pushing for what it called a Planet Protection Fund, as proposed by Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi at the Non-Aligned Summit in Belgrade last month, complete with the amount that each country must contribute a year.

Malaysian officials said they did not think it was wise to lay down such terms at this juncture, but raised no objections.

When the Commonwealth leaders settled for the existing mechanisms with a note to say that they "took account of proposals" to set up an international environment or planet protection fund, the Indians claimed victory.

The declaration, along with the strong official position for sanctions against South Africa, remained a lasting triumph of the Kuala Lumpur summit.

It was the only topic on which Dr Mahathir spoke at some length at the executive meeting. Although as conference chairman he had preferred to let others speak on the issues, he made an exception of the environment because "I felt strongly about putting forth a balanced perspective," he told Malaysian journalists.

He said it was the first time that

developed and developing countries were getting together to discuss the state of the Earth, for which the Third World had been getting the major blame.

"Even our own environmentalists were blaming us for climatic changes, the greenhouse effect all those things as though we were the ones who had gone to the West to cut down all those forests to build the dams and the cities and the plants that give out toxic waste," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the meeting agreed that the West was mostly to blame for the damage to the Earth, and all members accepted responsibility for cleaning it up and keeping it that way.

An Indian journalist said the declaration was "like all official statements, full of pious innuendoes." But many at the conference and even environmentalists disagreed with that view.

The main environmental groups in this country, Sahabat Alam Malaysia, EPSM and the newly formed Suaram, while disagreeing with certain parts of the declaration, commended it.

In a statement, they said the declaration "shows progress in the international political commitment to global environmental action."

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