

Key to saving

the Earth

From K. Bala

RIO DE JANEIRO, Sun. — Equity between rich and poor nations is the key to forging a global partnership to deal with environment and development problems, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

Addressing the Earth summit, the Prime Minister said thus far in economic matters and deliberations in the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UnCED), the advanced nations have shown no commitment to bridging the imbalance.

The thrust of Dr Mahathir's address at the summit of heads of Government was devoted to highlighting the imbalances and the lack of commitment by the rich nations to forge a global partnership to tackle environment and sustainable development.

To emphasise the message, Dr Mahathir, in a seven-minute address (the time limit for all leaders), referred to the way various vital issues were approached by the industrialised nations.

Calling for commitment from the rich nations and honesty from everyone, Dr Mahathir referred to the main issues of the Earth summit — global warming, biodiversity and funding for Agenda 21 — where some of the industrial nations continued to adopt double standards.

On the global warming issue, he said one of the major industrialised nations had refused to cut back on the emission of carbon dioxide.

"Since it is the major source of industrial pollution, its decision has rendered the agreement inequitable and meaningless," he said.

On the other hand, Malaysia has been cutting back on carbon dioxide emission which includes heavy taxes on vehicles — a 300 per cent levy on the bigger luxury vehicles, including heavy taxes on smaller cars.

"But in most developed countries, the tax on auto-



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mobiles and petrol is minimal, thus accounting for the high car population ratio," he said.

"Surely a reduction in the number of private cars and better public transportation will not change the lifestyle too much."

And yet, he said, this will do wonders for global warming — the convention on which Malaysia did not sign because of the refusal by the North not to set targets on reduction in carbon dioxide emission.

On biodiversity, the Prime Minister said the poor countries have been told to preserve their forests and other genetic resources for research.

"This is the same as telling these countries that they must continue to be poor because their forests and other resources are more precious than themselves," he said.

"Still they are not totally rejecting the value of biodiversity, at least not totally."

He reasoned that if something is discovered in the poor nation's forests they should be entitled to some returns.

But now the rich are saying they will not compensate the poor nations, because it was through their superior intelligence that they realised the potentials of the genes, making it intellectual property.

Developing countries who met in Kuala Lumpur less

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than two months ago had agreed on a plan to reafforest the whole world but this greening of the world initiative is being resisted by the West.

But still the North wants a forest convention.

Dr Mahathir said this showed the North wanted a direct say in the management of forests of the South at practically no cost to them.

Whatever small amount is being offered is much less than the earning potential of the poor nations and the North considers it a generous concession.

On the funding under the global environment facility (GEF) of the World Bank, the Prime Minister said "we will accept the GEF and we accept that it be administered by the OECD dominated World Bank".

"But can we have a little say? Can we not have more transparency in the administration of this fund?" he asked.

Dr Mahathir reminded the North that the poor are not asking for charity.

When the rich nations chopped down their forests, built polluting factories and scoured the world for cheap resources, the poor said nothing.

"Now the rich claim a right to regulate the development of the poor countries," he added.

Malaysia, he said, was disillusioned about these inequities "long before we reached Rio".

"In a world that has been won for democracy, we find powerful nations laying down terms even for participating in a democratic process," he said.

"We find scant regard for the principles of fairness and equity.

"We find that even the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21 have been watered down upon the insistence of the powerful and the rich."

Nevertheless, Dr Mahathir said there are high expectations of the conference "and we will consider it a success if there was better understanding on the need to overcome the problems on an equitable basis."