

PM leads chorus against unfair trade practices

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From Ahirudin Attan

NICOSIA (Cyprus), Thurs. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today led a chorus by Commonwealth leaders in condemning trade blocs and calling for a conclusive end to the Uruguay Round by the end of the year.

"While we welcome the economic success of many emerging 'dragons and tigers', we worry about growing protectionism through the emergence of trade blocs," the Prime Minister told the Commonwealth Heads of Governments Meeting (CHOGM).

On the Uruguay Round, he said: "We keep hoping, as we had hoped all these years, that the Uruguay Round of trade negotiations, the guardian of free trade, will come to a conclusive end by the close of this year."

Dr Mahathir, Commonwealth secretary-general Chief Emeka Anyaoku and the leaders of Australia, Dominica, Jamaica and Zimbabwe spoke in reply to remarks by Cyprus President Klafkos Clerides at the opening of the summit here.

Chief Anyaoku said the challenges posed by poverty and development remained one of Commonwealth's primary concerns.

"Like armies, democracies, too, march on their stomachs," he said.

He urged Commonwealth leaders to press for the establishment of a truly open and free global trading system. The successful conclusion of the Uruguay Round promised an annual addition to global income of US\$213 billion (RM532 billion) by the year 2002, he added.

"And yet that crucial step now looks uncertain, threatening not merely the loss of the huge gains but, worse, a spiralling descent into protectionism and isolationism."

Prime Minister Paul Keating even lashed out at Australia's friends in the developed world for dragging their feet on the deliberations in the Uruguay Round.

"Some rich countries still seem to believe that they can avoid making difficult concessions but still reap the advantages from the Round. I think they are completely wrong," he said.

Keating also said the time "is very short for us to prevent the collapse of the Uruguay Round".

For Jamaica Prime Minister P.J. Patterson, the "peace dividend" has yet to be realised. He cited these depressing facts:

- the income of the richest 20 per cent of the countries in the world is 150 times greater than that of the poorest fifth;

- one-sixth of the world's population enjoy five-sixths of the world's wealth; and,

- more than a billion people live in squalid conditions.

The situation, he said, was worsening as developing countries were being strangled by intolerable debt burdens which inhibited sustained development.

"Concrete measures are required in the area of multilateral debt. Surely, the international financial institutions, whose prescriptions for structural adjustment we have been forced to follow, must now make the necessary policy adjustments, with particular regard to those of their numbers who owe a substantial portion of their debt

to these institutions," he added.

Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe and Dominica Prime Minister Dame Eugenia Charles also joined the chorus in calling for the conclusion of the Uruguay Round and greater economic and technical co-operation among Commonwealth countries to expedite development and national growths.

Opening the summit, President Clerides said despite the new wealth achieved by some nations in recent years, poverty remained a painful reality which frustrated people's aspirations for a better quality of life and increased economic deprivation.

He said it was encouraging that the UN was showing a clear disposition to complement its Agenda for Peace with one of Development.

"It is inconceivable that peace can be built without addressing the stark realities of poverty, indebtedness, environmental degradation and meeting the challenge of sustainable development."