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7 heads of states to address forum

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will be one of seven Commonwealth heads of government leaders invited to address the organisation's inaugural business forum in London in October, Commonwealth Secretary-General Chief Emeka Anyaoku said yesterday,

The other six are the prime ministers of Britain, Canada, Australia, Singapore, Sri Lanka and Barbados.

Anyaoku said four finance ministers, namely from India, Zimbabwe, South Africa and Bangladesh, have also been invited to speak at the forum.

Speaking at a luncheon organised by the National Press Club in Kuala Lumpur yesterday, Anyaoku said some 300 participants are expected to attend the forum which is being held for the first time prior to the coming four-day Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) in Edinburgh, Scotland, from October 24.

He said 200 participants will come from the corporate sector, while the remaining 100 from the government agencies and departments.

"The business forum is being held to discuss how the private sector can contribute in the development of national economic projects within the Commonwealth.

"It is also hoped that it will boost trade investment among the private sector of the Commonwealth countries," he said, adding Commonwealth markets currently accounted for some 20 per cent of the global trade.

As such, he said, there is room for expanding in investment and trade within the Commonwealth.

For instance, he said, Malaysia's investment rate in several countries such as in South Africa, Ghana and the Asia-Pacific has been growing rapidly.

"I hope this forum will encourage further growth such as investment in the Commonwealth countries," he said, adding the Commonwealth has also set up a regional investment fund to boost trade among the Commonwealth countries.

He also acknowledged that Malaysia has been playing a prominent role in Commonwealth and even contributed through the Employees Provident Fund some US\$10 million (US\$1 = RM2.79) to the Commonwealth Regional Investment Fund's first project in Africa.

"We are also planning to invest in the Pacific region, South Asia and the Caribbean. We hope Malaysia can contribute its investment," he added.

Anyaoku, who arrived Kuala Lumpur last Friday for a five-day visit to Malaysia, was on a tour to five Commonwealth countries to undertake consultations with several key leaders to prepare for CHOGM.

Prior to Malaysia, he had visited Singapore and Brunei. He will be leaving for South Africa today and later Namibia before returning to London.

"I came to these five countries to consult the leaders on the preparation for CHOGM. Before I finalise my proposal to be presented at the meeting, I need to talk to some of the key leaders on their guidance and views," he added.

Praising Dr Mahathir as a leader who inspired the country's dynamic economic growth, Anyaoku said he had sought the prime minister's view on how to make a great success of the next CHOGM.

The meeting will also take on a special economic theme, the first in the history of CHOGM. "That is why we come to this part of the region (South-

East Asia)," he said, adding the Association of South-East Asian Nations (Asean) has been achieving an admirable rate of progress in the past nine to 10 years.

"Therefore, it is appropriate for me to come and talk to Dr Mahathir who led the country to a marvellous economic performance as well as meeting with Singapore premier Goh Chok Tong and the Sultan of Brunei."

Anyaoku also stressed the importance of forging an intra-linkage between Commonwealth countries and other regional groupings such as Asean and the North Atlantic Free Trade Area.

"These are groupings which are potential development economies but they also need linkages across other region.

"But with 53-member countries, that is why Commonwealth can constitute a link or contact across the world," he added.

Replying to a question, Anyaoku said he hoped for the return of Fiji into Commonwealth during the coming CHOGM. The fate of Nigeria and Sierra Leone will be decided when the eight-member Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) meets next month.

"The return of Nigeria and Sierra Leone, whose membership was suspended at the previous biennial CHOGM in Auckland, will depend on the CMAG's decision. The CMAG will meet next month to formulate recommendation to the Commonwealth heads of government," he added.

On Hong Kong, Anyaoku said the non-government administrators and professionals can still contribute and participate in activities organised by Commonwealth although the island's government administrative had been handed over to the Chinese rule since July 1.

On preparation for the Commonwealth Games in Kuala Lumpur next year, Anyaoku said he has full confidence that the event will be a success based on his recent visit to the Games' sites and video tape submitted to him.

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