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Blair: Commonwealth now more than ever

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - The Commonwealth is a unique organisation and is needed now more than ever before, said British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

Opening his Commonwealth message by defending the 54-member grouping against critics, Blair said the bonds which link the countries are extremely strong: history, values, culture and the English language.

"Some people say there is no future for the Commonwealth, that it is a collection of countries with nothing in common. They are quite wrong," he said.

His message was released by the British High Commission today. The Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting begins in Edinburgh tomorrow.

Blair said the Commonwealth can set an example to the world. It is a moral compass, he said, in a world of insecurity - tackling the problems of human rights abuses, environmental decay and poverty.

"Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will join me and other Commonwealth leaders (at the CHOGM) to discuss how we can make our countries safer, freer and more prosperous places to live," he said.

The Commonwealth now has a combined population of 1.6 billion and it is "more inclusive, more influential, than ever before."

Today's Commonwealth, he said, is working hard to safeguard democracy, protect the environment, promote education, jobs and prosperity for all. Its members also work closely together in tackling poverty and disease.

Aiming to give the Commonwealth an economic focus in line with its theme "Trade, Investment and Development: The Road to Commonwealth Prosperity", the Summit has been preceded for the first time by a Business Forum which "will tell Heads of Government exactly what they need."

"We shall concentrate on practical ways in which Commonwealth countries can work together in a partnership for the prosperity of all our citizens," he said.

On its political role in upholding democracy and good governance, Blair said the Commonwealth can hold its head high as it had firmly adhered to the principles of the Harare Declaration by suspending Nigeria from membership.

Britain will continue to work for the continued suspension of Nigeria until there are significant improvements, he said.

Nigeria was suspended when the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, set up in 1995, decided it had failed to meet the high standards in human rights and democracy of the 1991 Harare Declaration.

"CMAG will have an important agenda when it meets in Edinburgh. I am sure that the Heads will want to consider CMAG's continuing role," he said.

Another first for this year's CHOGM is the involvement of non-governmental organisations, described by Blair as representatives of the "People's Commonwealth".

The British Foreign and Commonwealth Office had funded a Commonwealth Centre for NGOs and over 100 organisations will hold programmes on subjects as diverse as landmines, women's rights, sustainable development and sports.

Young people will also be a special focus at the Commonwealth Centre. Blair said more than half of the 1.6 billion Commonwealth population are under 25.

"That means that we, collectively, represent the hopes and aspirations

of more than one in four young people in the world," he said.

The Commonwealth, Blair said, occupies a unique place among Britain's international partnership.

"Unique not only because of the historical ties, culture, sports and tradition but also because of the living ties of family and friendship.

"Unique also because of the scope for co-operation among 54 countries of all sizes, from all continents, at every stage of economic development, which share a commitment to common ideals of fairness, democracy, equality and growth," he said.

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