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CHOGM set to break new ground

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AT least 18,000 police officers, 40 sniffer dogs and 50 heads of government will converge on Edinburgh today for the 31st Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting.

This will be the first CHOGM to be held in Britain in 20 years and British Prime Minister Tony Blair's first time as host of an international meeting.

Other than Blair, there will be 19 other new faces at the meeting instead of the usual four or five.

Another first for CHOGM will be the attendance of a President without a country. Ahmad Tejan Kabbah of Sierra Leone, who will attend the meeting, was elected President in February 1996 and was ousted in May this year.

CHOGM brings together countries from diverse geographical locations and background who have in common the English language and similar forms of government. Not all are former colonies of Britain.

It is the only international organisation that requires no translators at meetings. Because of that the leaders of each country can sit down and talk to one another without their officials.

Which is what the leaders actually do during their retreat. They leave their officials, including their foreign ministers behind and get away for informal talks and exchange of ideas. They then return and allow their officials and foreign ministers to work out the details.

This meeting also brings together some of the most respected and established leaders, not only in their own countries but around the world - Nelson Mandela of South Africa, Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe, Sam Nujoma of Namibia and our own Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The theme for this year's CHOGM will be "Trade, Investment and Development - the Road to Commonwealth Prosperity" and it is expected that they will decide at the end of the meeting to hold a Commonwealth Trade Ministers' Conference.

While trade among the Commonwealth is only 20 per cent of total world trade, there is great potential that it could be greater. Commonwealth Secretary-General Chief Emeka Anyaoku has said this was an important reason for the change in members' assessment of the grouping.

Environmental issues are expected to be discussed, considering the haze that has engulfed Malaysia and its neighbours in recent months.

British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook on his recent visit to Malaysia had said that the environment was an issue that he and Dr Mahathir had agreed to discuss at this meeting and have a possible agreement on forestry management.

Another issue that is likely to be taken up by Dr Mahathir will be the manipulation of currency markets that have affected not only Malaysia but its Asean neighbours as well.

Despite for the first time having an official theme that is related to trade, the main issues or the more interesting ones will still be human rights, democracy and good governance as stated in the Harare Declaration, which many analysts consider to be the real reason for the renewed interest in the Commonwealth.

The question as to what to do about Nigeria will be discussed at the meeting. Two years after the execution of Ken Saro-Wiwa and eight other Ogoni activists by the military regime of General Sani Abacha, the repression in Nigeria continues. The 1995 CHOGM in Auckland suspended

Nigeria's membership.

In July, the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG), which was created to monitor the political developments in Nigeria reported its findings.

Nigeria's President General Sani Abacha has not proven that any reforms have taken place and so its suspension will continue for another year, until and if he honours his promise to return Nigeria to civilian rule by Oct 1 next year and hold free and fair elections.

Tan Sri Musa Hitam who is a member of CMAG has said while Malaysia and CHOGM wanted Nigeria to remain in the Commonwealth, the world was watching and if the Commonwealth fails to act accordingly, the credibility of the Commonwealth would be questioned. The other seven members of CMAG are Britain, Canada, Jamaica, Ghana, New Zealand, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

Another country that has been suspended is Sierra Leone. The meeting is expected to discuss how to return the recently ousted Ahmad Tejan Kabbah to power. Kabbah's 1996 election ended four years of army rule.

Sierra Leone is one of the poorest countries in the world despite its rich deposits of diamonds and other minerals. The coup by Major Johnny Paul Koroma was the third in five years. He has stated that he intends on staying in power for at least four years.

The military junta of Koroma has not been recognised by any country. Sierra Leone's neighbours, ironically led by Nigeria, have imposed an air, sea and land blockade after the May 25 coup.

On Oct 9, the United Nations Security Council imposed oil, arms and travel embargoes on Sierra Leone against the military regime in a initiative that was drafted by Britain, its former colonial power.

Kenya and the Government of President Daniel Arap Moi, despite being one of the longest serving Presidents within the Commonwealth, has been persecuting its Opposition. Its human rights record will also probably be an issue for the members.

Moi, who has been in power since 1978, is supposed to face elections this year. However, to date, no election date has been set.

Opposition politicians and students have been harassed for months and their leaders beaten up in the streets. Recently, soldiers burst into Nairobi's Anglican Cathedral and teargassed and clubbed worshippers. On Oct 20, Kenyan riot police shot live bullets and teargas into a crowd of 700 people who had gathered for an Opposition rally.

It is estimated that 40 protests groups, among them Nigerians, Tamils, Aborigines, Cypriots and many others are expected in Edinburgh as well. They will actually be protesting for better human rights in their own countries.

Another potentially problematic issue will be the expansion of the grouping. Yemen and Rwanda have applied to join, Yasser Arafat has expressed an interest in becoming a member - once and if it achieves sovereignty. Israel, too has expressed an interest in joining the Commonwealth.

Of all the major regions in the world, only the Middle East is not represented at the Commonwealth. Accepting Yemen would give an Arab voice to the Commonwealth.

Myanmar, as a former British colony, may be a potential member. However, based on the Harare Declaration in 1991 on democracy, human rights and good governance, it would seem that its membership will not be accepted until it holds free and fair elections.

Ireland could also become a potential member. It was dropped when it changed from a dominion to a republic.

Other than the traditional political discussions of the meeting, this year's CHOGM will also see more than 200 youths, aged between 18 and 25

from all countries of the Commonwealth, meeting for the first Commonwealth Youth Forum.

For the first time, this CHOGM will also show the work of more than 100 NGOs.

Their issues will range from clean water to international youth exchanges.

After more than 50 years (the first meeting was in 1944) the 31st CHOGM will break new ground in many areas and provide more opportunities for closer relations between the heads of States, and for the people of the Commonwealth and its future generations.

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