

17/06/1997

Co-operation for development

A NEW multi-national grouping of developing nations has been formed. The thread that binds Malaysia, Turkey, Indonesia, Iran, Egypt, Nigeria, Pakistan and Bangladesh is co-operation for development which is the reason why the group is called D-8. And as the Prime Minister, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said at the first summit of the group at the Ciragan Palace in Istanbul on Sunday the D-8 must produce tangible results of co-operation between member countries.

Failure to produce results would only shunt the group aside as one of the innumerable international, multi-national or regional groupings of nations that are regarded as nothing more than highly pretentious "talk-shops." If this were to happen, then it should fold up as Dr Mahathir, never one to mince his words at international fora, rightly made it clear.

Elaborating on the raison d'etre of the group, the Prime Minister pointed out that it is time that the poor countries began co-operating and trading with each other. The rich and advanced nations have always been trading with the poor nations and they have always gained from such arrangements. The poor nations should learn from this and set into motion initiatives that would debunk the myth that poor nations are not good trading partners. Malaysia for one would like to learn from other members. It would like to co-operate with them. It would like to trade with them.

Malaysia, as Dr Mahathir said, subscribes to the thesis that the initial membership of the group should be small not because the members desire to be exclusive but because of the need for the group to be manageable. It is true that there is strength in numbers but it is equally true that numbers also weigh the members down. The larger the grouping the more difficult it would be to arrive at a consensus. But once co-operation and trade amongst the eight members have been achieved then the doors would be opened for other developing and poor nations. But co-operation, especially economic co-operation and trade do not make nations strong. What does is political stability. And as Dr Mahathir said, developing nations should have political stability more than before for the simple reason that without it even the economically strong would become weak. To achieve political stability each developing country must evolve democracy in its own mould. Each nation must be allowed to shape democracy at its own pace without harassment and threats.

That speech perhaps set the tone of the D-8 summit for it ended with a joint statement, the Istanbul Declaration. It called for co-operation in all areas including political consultation and co-ordination at international fora. The call to consult, to co-ordinate and to articulate in one voice the views and aspirations of the small, poor, and developing nations has been the single over-riding theme of Dr Mahathir's speeches in many, many international fora.

Hopefully, the D-8 nations would achieve some results in co-operation in trade, industry and many other areas before the next summit in Dhaka in November or December 1998. The eight countries have a combined trade volume of US\$400 billion (RM1 trillion). Any increase in trade as a result of co-operation among member countries would contribute to their GDPs. A year and a half remains for members to work out deals. Otherwise the next summit would only be another round of mere talk.

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