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Commonwealth faces moment of truth at Edinburgh meeting

Syed Nadzri in Edinburgh

THE Commonwealth, now 54-nation strong and threatening to grow some more, faces another moment of truth when its leaders meet in Edinburgh later this week.

And the big question is: Is it still nothing but a talk-shop with plenty of words and very little action? Is it a hangover from the British imperial past?

Chief Emeka Anyaoku, the secretary-general of the organisation, for one, doesn't think so, and he is confident that this CHOGM will remain the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting and not a cheap holiday on government money derided by many.

Anyaoku singled out the 1991 CHOGM in Harare as the turning point because that was when the whole programme was introduced to make the Commonwealth a force for democracy and good governance and a more effective instrument for the promotion of sustainable development.

Known as the Harare declaration, this principle set the tone for the subsequent meetings in Cyprus in 1993 and Auckland in 1995.

The Auckland meeting, for instance, suspended Nigeria from the organisation for failing the good governance test in executing human rights activist Ken Saro Wiwa and eight of his followers.

Nigeria's status will be up for review in Edinburgh and Malaysia will play a key role in determining whether or not the African country deserves to be back in the mainstream.

Malaysia is among eight countries in the Commonwealth ministerial action group whose job is to police current political developments in Nigeria. This group, which also consists of Britain, Canada, Jamaica, Ghana, New Zealand, South Africa and Zimbabwe, will submit a report during this CHOGM.

Malaysia is represented in this group by its special envoy Tan Sri Musa Hitam who will be accompanying Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to Edinburgh.

It is understood that the action group will recommend that Nigeria be expelled altogether if there is no "demonstrable progress" in conditions in that country.

Musa had said recently that Malaysia and CHOGM wanted Nigeria to remain in the Commonwealth. "Nevertheless, the world is watching how we address the issue and if we fail to act accordingly, the credibility of the Commonwealth will be questioned."

Perhaps it is this - and the fact that there appears to be significant economic and commercial advantages to be gained from Commonwealth links - that makes more countries want to become members. Some of those interested have no links whatsoever with the British colonial past. Israel, for one.

It is understood that Israel's membership is on the agenda in Edinburgh following a series of meetings between Anyaoku and Israeli officials of late.

If this is so, it is definitely going to put Malaysia in a spot with the repercussions it could bring. And the prospects look discomfiting.

There are no diplomatic ties between Malaysia and Israel. And assuming Israel gets admitted, Dr Mahathir may find himself seated just two or three chairs away from Benjamin Netanyahu at the next meeting because such seating arrangements are always according to the alphabetical order of the countries.

For the record, at CHOGM, decisions are made and issues resolved, not through vote, but consensus. How easily this is going to be done when 54 countries are involved is another matter altogether, although it is pertinent to note that CHOGM is the biggest summit of leaders held without interpreters. Everyone conducts the proceedings in English.

As for the economic and commercial advantages of being a Commonwealth member, these issues will be put to a real test this time around because the theme of the Edinburgh CHOGM is "Trade, Investment and Development: The Road to Commonwealth Prosperity".

Total trade among Commonwealth countries amounts to about 20 per cent of global commerce and this is said to be growing rapidly.

Anyaoku said this was an important factor in making member countries reassess the value of their Commonwealth link in a more positive way.

"It is worth exploring how these links could be activated and built upon to the mutual benefit of members."

The same theme will be considered by the Commonwealth business forum in London on Wednesday which will bring together business leaders and senior government representatives.

Apart from all these, this CHOGM provides an added significance to Malaysia in that it not only coincides with its 40th year in the grouping, it is also the last one before Kuala Lumpur hosts the Commonwealth Games next year.

Sukom executive chairman Jen (Rtd) Tan Sri Hashim Mohamed Ali is among those in the Malaysian delegation in Edinburgh and he is expected to make presentations, officially and by the sidelines, to delegates.

He is expected to provide updates about facilities and convince delegates that Sukom '98 will take place despite reservations about the haze and the economic problems besetting Malaysia.

As in previous meetings, ministers and senior officials will meet in parallel sessions to fine-tune the resolutions and decisions to be adopted in the final communique.

By the time the leaders come together on Friday, the ground work will have been done and all they have to do is endorse or reject them.

The heads will move to St Andrews for their weekend retreat and it is here, in a very informal atmosphere and away from the madding environment of convention centres, that they will have the opportunity to discuss matters outside the main agenda.

St Andrews is the "Home of Golf" and expectations are high that leaders won't three-putt at any juncture.

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