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CHOGM-Mahathir

COMMONWEALTH HAS TO SURVIVE BORDERLESS WORLD, MAHATHIR

By: Zainoor Sulaiman

EDINBURGH, Oct 24 (Bernama) -- The Commonwealth can only survive in the Information Age and the globalised world if it makes itself relevant in terms of tradition, trade, investments and development, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said tonight.

This year's CHOGM, which broke tradition by having a common theme of trade, investment and development was opened by Queen Elizabeth II who arrived at the conference hall in a striking yellow dress and a matching hat.

Participants saw a video presentation on a new vision of the Commonwealth, with a resounding soundtrack of drumbeats, delivered by actor John Thaw.

Delivering the opening speech at the first executive session of the 31st Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM) here, Dr Mahathir said it was important that the Commonwealth understood what was in the offing at a time when the world was galloping towards liberalisation and globalisation, and when membership of the Commonwealth could be considered less important than membership of the world community.

"We do not have much time left," he said.

Dr Mahathir went on: "The non-Commonwealth powers are not going to allow exclusivity within the Commonwealth. They see wealth to be exploited in the Commonwealth. And they are not going to be kept out simply because they are not members of the club."

He told the Commonwealth leaders that "we in South East Asia had seen how anarchic a globalised world could be when word goes round that "Greed is Great".

For the world to progress there must not only be a level playing field but fair competition with players evenly matched." he said.

If this was not so, the disadvantaged of the world would only be further disadvantaged in a world without borders and barriers, said Dr Mahathir.

"I am sounding a note of caution here simply because Malaysia is currently suffering from an attack on its economy after having embraced the concept of globalisation and liberalised its trading and investment rules."

Alluding to the currency crisis, the Prime Minister said that it had wiped out 40 years of sweat, toil and tears in just a few weeks under present rules in which "we had no say in their formulation."

"We must be cautious when embracing concepts not of our own making," he said.

Without mentioning names, he said: "People who rob the poor can pose as philanthropists and receive accolades."

"This is an unfair world. Many of us have struggled hard and even shed blood in order to be independent. When borders are down and the world becomes a single entity, independence can become meaningless. All will be equal of course but the cunning and the rich will be more equal than the rest."

He said it was imperative that "we understand what is in the offing and then choose whether to struggle alone against overwhelming odds or to stay together as a Commonwealth and try to bring about some order to the globalised world that is being taunted by those with much to gain."

The world had no choice but to liberalise and become more global, but doing away with borders and national policies did not mean doing away with

rules and regulations completely, he said.

He said that in the last two or three years several countries inside and outside the Commonwealth had decided to explore new ways of co-operating for growth.

"Instead of aid and loans, it was decided that there should be partnerships, partnerships involving the government and the private sector, together with foreign investors. Such a partnership should benefit all partners evenly."

Such a partnership should involve "true" participation by all according to the area of expertise or resources that each had.

"Thus while one country may play the host and supply the workforce, another would supply the expertise or management and the third the capital. The objective is to enable the host country to develop the know-how and to be able to set up and manage similar enterprises on their own later on," he said.

He went on to say that in this partnership, the focus would not be just on investment, but also on government, administration, laws, policies, practices and ethics conducive to the good running of the projects invested in.

This is essential because the running of a market economy is far more complex than that of the centrally-planned socialist economy. It must never be assumed that the skill of management is hereditary. In the context of a modern economy, management is really very complex and needs great skills. Such skills can be acquired," he said.

The Commonwealth could make a success of the proposal for smart partnerships mooted at the Langkawi International Dialogue (LID), the Southern Africa International Dialogue (SAID '97) and the Barbados International Dialogue (BID), he added.

"Many of the Commonwealth countries which have matured and successfully managed their development would be in a position to help. They can provide the training, participate in the smart partnerships enterprises and help market products. They can engage in the privatisation of the government institutions and the infrastructure."

"We have not much time left," he said.

Earlier, in his opening address, British Prime Minister Tony Blair echoed much the same sentiments.

"In a world where black and white do not always live together harmoniously, (the Commonwealth) can be an example of tolerance, understanding and equality. And in a world where north and south are often in conflict, the Commonwealth can provide a forum of co-operation and joint endeavour," he said.

Blair went on: "The relationship between the developed and developing world should be a partnership. We need each other. The richer Commonwealth countries must help the poorer, not least to reduce their debt burden."

Forty-two heads of government together with eight country representatives will continue their deliberation until late Saturday before going into their traditional retreat at St Andrews, about 90KM north of here before coming back to wrap-up the summit on Monday. -- Bernama.

ZS AAM