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Dr M calls for virtual forum by all nations

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today called on the world community to help shape a common future together, proposing a virtual forum in which all nations take part in deciding issues.

He said there was now a need for the international community to begin a dialogue towards formulating a new global framework for information age governance and nurturing a global civil society.

Stressing that Malaysia would like to take the concept of Malaysia Incorporated a step further towards global smart partnerships, Dr Mahathir said:

"We invite collaboration instead of confrontation, enrichment instead of exploitation, sharing instead of grabbing. These should remain the watchwords - these should provide the basis towards evolving a just and equitable society."

The Malaysia Inc concept is one in which the Government and the private sector work closely together to develop the nation.

Speaking at the opening of the Multimedia Asia 1997 Conference and Exhibition at the Mines Resort City in Sungei Besi, Dr Mahathir proposed that the forum be called the Virtual Commonwealth of Nations, where all countries would be equally represented and participation truly democratic.

Alluding to the recent United States' "Framework of Global Electronic Commerce" initiative which advocates non-regulated private sector leadership, the Prime Minister said as the market rewarded the efficient and punished the inefficient and the less able, efficiency and equity would not go hand in hand.

Therefore, he cautioned, leaving the industry to the self-regulating market would only widen the gap between the info-rich and info-poor.

He added that the laissez-faire market was myopic, interested only in the bottom line, with no concern for social justice.

"Can a free market really replace responsible governance?" he asked, adding that there was a need for a new framework of governance where the concerns of distributive justice existed alongside a free market system for the digital economy.

Later, when asked by a participant to elaborate on the virtual forum concept during a plenary session, Dr Mahathir said basically, it meant there should be full participation of all nations when an issue affected the countries of the world.

"The effect of a borderless world is that the whole world will become our country. So, surely everybody who lives in this world has the right to decide what kind of society it is going to be."

Dr Mahathir felt it would be very wrong for any single country to make a decision without consulting other countries, adding that communication was no longer a problem now due to advancements in technology.

"In the days when people had to sail by ship taking three months to reach another country, lack of consultation was excusable. But today, I can literally talk to President (Bill) Clinton here and now if he agrees to talk to me.

"Communication is not a problem now, we can talk to each other. We can even make faces at each other if we want to. So why can't we have a virtual Commonwealth, not so much like the one formed by the British but just over the media, video conferencing, radio, telephone and other

facilities?"

Dr Mahathir cited as an example the decision by the Group of Seven countries to revalue the yen without consulting other countries, resulting in Malaysia having to pay more for loans taken in the Japanese currency.

Earlier, Dr Mahathir said in the information age, the new basis for power, wealth and influence would be knowledge, in which no one has a monopoly.

"Therefore, anyone can add and acquire power and wealth ... this should lead to a more open and equitable society. However, currently, knowledge tends to stick with the well-endowed."

The Prime Minister argued that this would lead to a society where the rich and educated would get richer and more powerful, and the poor and uneducated, poorer and weaker.

With the advancements in multimedia and networking technologies, Dr Mahathir felt multiculturalism would be the way of life in the future.

Thus, he said, countries needed to make adjustments so that the closeness would not result in the stepping of each other's toes too frequently.

"Instead, our closeness and more frequent exposure to each other and to information about ourselves should enable us to develop a strong sense of neighbourliness. In time, we should be able to develop a multicultural global society."

The Prime Minister said the disappearance of borders between nations simply meant that a bigger entity or a new and world-encompassing nation would emerge.

"Knowledge by itself is not going to make this huge single human tribe live in peace. Certainly, unregulated free trade, even if backed by massive information, will not result in wealth and happiness for everyone."

Dr Mahathir said one could plunge into the information age with eyes closed, but asked why this approach should be taken when there was the possibility of testing and finding out how things would work out.

He said the MSC was an attempt to create the environment for testing not just the technology, but the way of life itself, adding that the opportunities for experimenting were unlimited.

Among those present at the opening were Energy, Telecommunications and Posts Minister Datuk Leo Moggie, Multimedia Development Corporation executive chairman Tan Sri Dr Othman Yeop Abdullah and permanent secretary to the National Information Technology Council and president and chief executive of Mimos Bhd, Tengku Datuk Dr Mohd Azzman Shariffadeen.

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