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For a democratic world

SPEAK up, Asia. If the needs and opinions of more than half the world are to count in global decision-making processes that will affect them in the next century, its peoples have to overcome a lifetime of diffidence, passivity and timidity. As the extreme by-products of civilised behaviour, these traits have held back Asians from taking a place on the global stage.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who has led by example in speaking up for the South, has sent out a strong signal to Asian countries to make themselves heard as well. He has it in mind to achieve a balance within the global community, in place of domination by the North.

Refreshingly, his message is about building up confidence and taking on a greater share of responsibility. It is about contributing to a global leadership that sees beyond limited military and economic objectives. It is about democratic rights and, yes, especially the human right to an equitable world. If countries of the North can practise what they preach so loudly, they should have no problems with listening to voices from the South.

Asia is the home of the world's oldest civilisations. However, the unfortunate subjugation of her peoples by colonisers in many instances has led to the misimpression that the South is neither entitled or mature enough to be a key player in world matters. Preoccupied with meeting basic human needs through development, Asian nations have also neglected to build a profile of credibility and decisiveness.

As a result, an insidious form of colonisation has crept into dealings between unequal partners. And the onus is still on the South to live up to the unilateral demands of the North, without due regard for the disparity in development and the differing priorities this brings about.

Like it or not, countries of the South will have to be more united and assertive to establish their claim to participatory governance. Such a partnership would widen perspectives and expand options for multilateral action in areas of common interest. To focus on concepts of consultation, to put forward practicable recommendations, and to prevent injustice to nations that cannot afford to speak on their own behalf - these are all duties of fair-minded global citizens.

Obviously, there can be no naivety in the South. Any show of strength on the international front can only be supported by political stability and economic growth on the domestic front. From such a position could arise dignity and respect - no matter how grudgingly given - for proven leadership qualities that can then be extended to global decisions.

But statesmanship, negotiating skills and sound judgment cannot be acquired if Asian neighbours continue to be embroiled in conflicts inherited from past administrations. Where pride remains the only basis for protracted conflicts, avenues for resolution must be found to end decades of death and wasteful destruction, and to free up resources for human and economic development.

Clearly, Asia will have to win the image war before it is taken seriously by the rest of the world. For, with the international media well-positioned to zoom in on bad news, the transmission of visuals of political strife, man-made disasters, ethnic tensions and poverty will be no testimonial to the ability of the South to govern itself, let alone share in the burden of running the world.

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