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Liberalisation of economies will be D-8's top priority

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ISTANBUL, The liberalisation of members' economies will be a top priority of the inaugural summit meeting of the new Developing 8 countries, or D-8, this Sunday.

Turkish Prime Minister Necmettin Erbakan, who proposed the creation of the economic cooperation group last year, was said to have patterned it on the Group of Seven (G-7) gathering of the most industrialised nations, but the D-8 will at least act as a catalyst for more close collaborations not only within the Muslim world but also among the developing South.

Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who attended the D-8 ministerial meeting here in January, said apart from bringing the member nations closer, it could also be the focus for members to resolve obstacles to expanding cooperation among them.

But in making D-8 a reality, it is important for its members to focus on specific targets to ensure success and avoid being branded another talk-shop for developing countries. It would also prove wrong the view that Muslim countries cannot succeed in any cooperation they initiate.

The Muslim world, even with the exclusion of the rich Arab nations, could easily accumulate foreign reserves of more than US\$1.3 trillion (US\$ = RM2.51), according to findings by the D-8 secretariat here.

Even without proper trade relations with the G-7, the amount of trade among the Muslim countries can easily generate turnover of about US\$72 billion a year, far more than the amount recorded by any of the G-7 countries with Muslim nations put together.

The D-8 should not be seen as a forum to counter other groupings, be it the G-7, Group of 15 or even the Organisation of Islamic Conference. Instead, other groupings should see it as a catalyst that will complement each other's interest in pursuing their economic agenda.

After all, as Erbakan had said, one of the main tasks of the D-8 is to seek better cooperation with other groupings such as the G-7 and the European Union, hoping for the existence of a fair trade and other economic relations with them.

Economically, countries in the D-8 - Turkey, Malaysia, Iran, Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, Bangladesh and Nigeria - are quite stable in the sense that their current fiscal policies enable them to adjust their economic management according to the needs of their domestic development requirements.

Bangladesh, which is far behind in terms of economic achievements, will get a boost in its economy with its membership in the grouping.

In a way, this is the spirit of cooperation that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been campaigning for: the commonwealth of growth, and justice in economic prosperity throughout the globe. A balanced world society will eventually lead to political stability in nations, and that is already a guarantee to a better flow of trade among countries and regions.

The D-8 has already laid a foundation for future cooperation in finance, banking, investments, privatization, coordination of private sectors, technology and small- and medium-scale industry.

The summit, which will be preceded by meetings of officials and ministers beginning tomorrow, will also focus on increasing trade and investment, human resource development, science and technology, tourism and communications.

Countries like Malaysia, for instance, can share its expertise in promoting the private sector as the engine of growth for national development, trade liberalisation and other areas.

Malaysia can also incorporate its smart partnership concept into the D-8, and Dr Mahathir himself is expected to inject this idea when he delivers his speech on Sunday.

While D-8 members share the same religion, the grouping should be seen as constructive and positive within and outside the OIC.

As the group will be opened to other Muslim countries soon, it is expected that more efforts will be made to improve the summit's agenda.

Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, who is also attending the summit has pledged full support and commitment to making the group meet its objectives.

Many people tend to see Muslim countries as being incapable of achieving anything, and this is why it is paramount that the D-8 becomes a successful group.

Some analysts, including observers from the West, are convinced that the D-8 will emerge as one of the leading groups among the developing world, especially with participation of Malaysia, Indonesia, Turkey and Egypt.

As trade liberalisation will be the main subject to be discussed during the summit, the group is expected to take a positive approach in addressing problems in poorer member countries.

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