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Magic of the Commonwealth prevails over substance

Syed Nazri in Edinburgh

SHORT on issues and real substance, but never lacking in spirit and enthusiasm - that seems to be the magic which kept the Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting going in Edinburgh.

The fact that Nigeria, the principal topic of discussion in Auckland two years ago, had to again hog the limelight in this biennial gathering, showed to a large extent that the Commonwealth is fast living up to its reputation of being merely a club with very little to show except that member countries are suffering the British colonial hangover.

Even then the issue concerning Nigeria has still not been firmly resolved.

The country, which was suspended from the 54-nation grouping at the Auckland meeting for failing the good governance test, is still in the same position - neither readmitted nor expelled altogether.

The leaders at this CHOGM are using the "wait-and-see" line in dealing with the military Government under Gen Sani Abacha which executed human rights activist Ken Saro Wiwa and eight of his followers two years ago.

Now they are giving the Nigerian regime until Oct 1 next year to hold free elections and return to parliamentary democracy through civilian rule.

"So, what else is new?" asked an observer although he conceded that the introduction of a theme - one that centres on trade co-operation and shared prosperity - tried to break new ground.

An African official attending the summit said it was good that CHOGM was trying to be more focused in addressing issues.

"But the economic declaration that came out of the discussions on trade matters appears to be a bit verbose. And it is not even binding - not even on us, what more the rest of the world."

The declaration, in a nutshell, concluded with words and phrases like the leaders "agree to enhance the Commonwealth's role in building consensus on global economic issues and on an equitable structuring of international economic relations."

And these words, the official said, have very little meaning unless they are put into practice.

But Edinburgh CHOGM came at a significant time for Malaysia - when the country's currency and stock markets were pushed into the doldrums.

This perhaps explains why Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself determinedly fought off a bout of flu just to be present although he had skipped such CHOGM summits in the past.

Dr Mahathir's presence in fact must have contributed greatly to the inclusion of a statement on recent developments in the currency markets in the Edinburgh Commonwealth Economic Declaration.

He said there was greater awareness now among Commonwealth leaders of the negative effects of such activities and that this was in line with the decision of the recent Commonwealth Finance Ministers meeting in Mauritius.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had to make unilateral efforts to contact other countries to explain the developments because not all Commonwealth countries were affected by currency speculation or were familiar with it.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia had to put more efforts on bilateral discussions at Edinburgh because the problems it was facing were different from those confronting other member countries.

Dr Mahathir appeared to have more confidence in the Commonwealth now than he ever had.

He credited the smooth progress of the summit to the able chairmanship of British Prime Minister Tony Blair.

The Prime Minister found that the new British Government seemed to be more sympathetic towards CHOGM with Blair himself being more willing to hear the views of all parties and accepting some of them even though he might have a different view.

Dr Mahathir said the informal discussions during Sunday's retreat to St Andrews were open and comprehensive.

He said he was pleased with the summit's decision on membership criteria, citing the rights of the Palestinian State to become a member once it was fully constituted in 1999.

The long queue for membership even among countries with no historical links with the British Empire can be quite surprising to some, particularly to those who regard the Commonwealth as having outlived its usefulness.

But the fact that Palestine, Rwanda and Yemen had applied to join and their applications were being considered defied this logic.

The countries must have taken a cue from Mozambique which was admitted only recently although it is historically more Portuguese than British.

Quite fortunately, the question of Israel becoming a member was not really delved into though the matter threatened to, following overtures from the Israeli Government.

Malaysia's other interests arising out of Edinburgh include the country's continued presence in the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group, the agency to look into human rights abuses and oversee good governance in member countries.

Malaysia was principally selected to be in the eight-member CMAG when it was formed at the last CHOGM along with Britain, Canada, Ghana, Jamaica, New Zealand, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

The composition changed a bit this time around with Barbados and Botswana coming in to replace Jamaica and South Africa. But it could be the confidence placed on Malaysia that caused it to be retained though some prefer to believe that it is only filling in the Asian quota as other countries in the region were not interested.

Malaysian officials initially held their breath over whether the Commonwealth Games to be held in Kuala Lumpur would bring forth controversial issues, particularly over the haze problem affecting the region.

But Sukom officials led by Jen (B) Tan Sri Hashim Mohamed Ali did a splendid public relations job in Edinburgh to convince delegates and officials that everything was in order.

Hashim had pledged to make Sukom '98 the best Games ever.

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