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Mahathir: D-8 must show results (HL)

Jailani Harun in Istanbul

ISTANBUL, Sun: The world's youngest economic grouping, the Developing-8 (D-8), must show irrefutable results on a yearly basis if it wants to gain credibility, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"If we fail, then we should not make a pretence of being useful. We should fold up rather than hold meaningless meetings. That is the challenge that we have to face," he said.

Addressing the inaugural summit meeting of the D-8 here today, he also issued a stinging warning that in order to ensure success in its undertakings, the D-8 members must first secure internal political stability and a strong government as to accelerate growth in individual nation.

Without political stability, he said, even the economically strong will become weak while the economically weak will become totally paralysed.

"I would like once again to make it clear and to emphasise that I am not advocating authoritarian rule. I am advocating democracy as it practised by the Western democrats during their democracy infancy.

"When they were less liberal democratically, no one condemned them or threatened them. We are asking that we be allowed to evolve our democracy at our own pace without harassment and threats," he said.

Once the D-8 is politically stable, then only can its participating countries focus seriously on economic growth and the welfare of their people.

"Malaysia has copied openly and unashamedly from others. We copied from the West and when the East did well, we initiated our Look East policy. We even learn from the failures of others for then we would know what to avoid. And still we are looking around in order to learn from others," he said.

Saying that this is the reason Malaysian welcomed the D-8, Dr Mahathir stressed the need for the grouping to work cohesively together for mutual benefit.

Citing the South-South cooperation as an example, he said trade between members of the Group of 15 and with other developing countries has grown tremendously, and similarly trade between developing countries of South-East Asia has trebled in just five years.

The D-8 countries, he said, can increase trade between them as well if they put in place the necessary policy and legal framework, but again, this can only be done by a strong political leadership.

"Cooperation between countries is now the accepted formula for accelerating progress and development. Even the developed countries are forming unions in order to grow their economy. It is now recognised that the most important thing to any Government or country is the well-being of its own people.

"Certainly for developing countries like ours, cooperation for economic development is even more important. Our people are in need not so much for affluence as they need just the basic necessities of like in order to live with dignity as befitting members of the human race.

"It is true that there is strength in numbers. But numbers can also weigh us down. In the eight countries of this group, there are almost 800 million people. Whether they will contribute to strengthening us or whether they will weigh us down depends very much on us," he said.

Malaysia, he said, subscribes to the initial small membership of the D-8

because it is more manageable. Once progress or success has been achieved, the membership could be open to others. The founding members of the D-8 are Turkey, Malaysia, Iran, Egypt, Nigeria, Bangladesh, Indonesia and Pakistan.

The Prime Minister also said that apart from being developing countries, members of the D-8 have a large Muslim population.

"Islam has been blamed by Muslims and non-Muslims alike, for the backwardness of our countries. I happen to think that this is not true. Islam had not only inspired the feuding primitive Arabs to unite and build the greatest empire in history but it has also enriched materially, spiritually and in terms of human knowledge all those who accepted the faith.

"If today's Muslims are backward, it cannot be due to Islam. It is most likely to be due to erroneous interpretation of Islamic teachings. There are in our countries many who are learned in Islam. The majority of them wish to see the return of past greatness. We should call upon them to sincerely study and interpret the teachings of Islam," he said, adding that it is illogical to think that a religion could be the cause for a great civilisation to decline and fall.

"It is not Islam which is wrong. It is the ummah who have failed the religion. How else can we explain the quarrels and wars between Muslims when Islam enjoins us to be brothers? Yet there are many among us who blatantly preach enmity between us and not brotherhood. Is Islam wrong or are those who interpret the religion wrong?"

Dr Mahathir said the D-8 must serve as a purposeful forum of like-minded countries to exchange views and devise specific programme of actions for effective cooperation among themselves.

The D-8, which is formed within the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) is meant to spur aggressive economic relations among the OIC members. It was proposed by Turkish Prime Minister Dr Necmettin Erbakan last year. The summit is attended by all but heads of government from Egypt and Nigeria.

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