

05/05/1997

Meet hopes to promote regional ties

Jailani Harun in Kasane (Botswana)

KASANE (Botswana), Sun: The first Southern African International Dialogue (Said) opened today with hopes to achieve a better regional cooperation in economic, social and politics.

With President Sir Ketumile Masire opening the conference on a high note of expectation for the 12 participating nations, the conference is already a centre of discussion for businessmen seeking opportunities to foster stronger collaboration in various areas.

Malaysia, whose idea of Smart Partnership has paved the way for this dialogue, is getting special attention with the attendance of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Participants and observers in this north-east town of landlocked Botswana are convinced that Said will be able to address the issue of economic backwardness among some member countries by adopting the model of framework at the Langkawi International Dialogue (Lid) last year.

Botswana, the host for this first meeting, is also seeking fresh bilateral relations with other African nations as well as Malaysia. At present, trade between Malaysia and Botswana is relatively small, with Malaysia exporting some RM2 million last year and importing almost nothing.

Dr Mahathir, who arrived in Botswana yesterday, attended a meeting with Malaysian and Botswanan corporate leaders in the capital city of Gaborone last night, before flying in to Kanase this morning.

The meeting in Gaborone has suggested the setting up of a joint business council between the two countries, with the objective to build up more business contacts which is to be based on a win-win situation.

With "Smart Partnership for the Generation of Wealth in Southern Africa" chosen as the theme, Said will also discuss other common issues such as politics, education, social and cultural cooperation.

Dr Mahathir, the guest speaker for the dialogue, will deliver his keynote address tomorrow.

Among others, he is expected to reiterate the importance of close relationship between the government and the private sector in leading the economic growth, globalisation, South-South cooperation, and North-South relations.

At the Lid last year, Dr Mahathir had said the time has come for developing nations to reorganise themselves by embarking on a more progressive development plan which is free from the dictation of the North.

Most of the African nations are observing a moderate economic uptrend over the past few years. Botswana, for example, has chalked annual growth of more than 10 per cent since 1995.

The four-day conference is also expected to identify areas peculiar to the region and ways to exploit them for the mutual benefit of the whole region, but in liaison with the other parts of the world.

Apart from the host nation and Malaysia, the other participating countries are Angola, Lesotho, Mozambique, Malawi, Namibia, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

The dialogue is co-sponsored by Botswana, Namibia, Zimbabwe and Malawi.

Heads of government and state attending the dialogue include South African President Nelson Mandela, President Joaquim Chissano of Mozambique, Mr Benjamin Mkapa of Tanzania, Mr Jerry Rawlings of Ghana, Mr

Yoweri Museveni of Uganda and Mr Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe.

The US, Canada, the UK and Taiwan have also sent representatives to the dialogue. Some 250 captains of industries from all these countries are also taking part.

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