

07/05/1997

## Outsmarting the rich

NEVER one to flinch when facing first world leaders nor mince his words when criticising their often self-serving agendas in world fora, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad rightly urged south African nations to forge a united front. Such forms as Smart Partnerships would check the stranglehold that the G-7 countries, the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund have on poor nations.

Alone not only the voice of one poor country would be weak and but also it would be lost in the wilderness. United, the southern African nations would gain strength to take a common stand when faced with the "damaging proposals" from the developed countries of the North.

This, as Dr Mahathir, pointed out is precisely what the Association of Southeast Nations did at the World Trade Organisation Ministerial meeting last year. The US aspired to dovetail a child-labour ban clause to rules on the free flow of international trade. Such a proposal if accepted would make many poor countries, highly dependent on child labour, even more poor.

For one, thousands of Bangladeshi children stitch foot-balls in cottages dotted throughout that country which has a per capita income of only US\$13. These children contribute a monthly US\$10 (RM25) to the household budget. If this is taken away what would happen to the people and by extension to Bangladesh? Using such cogent and irrefutable arguments, Asean countries were able to prevail over the imposition of "damaging proposals."

And the way is simple but hard and tough. Speaking at a banquet commemorating the inaugural Southern Africa International Dialogue in Kasane, Botswana on Monday, he said: "We are not without assets and experience." The little assets that each country have could be shared and that would consolidate collective strength.

Forging regional Smart Partnerships is vital as the poor among nations of the world face new challenges. Among them, as the Prime Minister warned, the North was about to recolonise the South through "globalisation."

The borders which define sovereign countries will be erased and economic competition on a so-called level playing field is about to be set into motion. And as is manifest in the proposals put up by the rich nations globalisation favours them, not the poor countries whom the free-flow of international trade is supposed to help.

Many countries, although freed of the yoke of colonial rule, now find that they are more dependent. Politics, economy, social and behavioural systems are still controlled by the colonisers of the past, either directly or indirectly.

They and their transnational companies determine and direct the flow of investments which are the founts of the poor and growing economies. Thus investments determine the growth of economies which in turn shape the social and behavioural character of the workers. Ultimately it also is a vital factor of political stability.

The Prime Minister's speech at the first Southern African International Dialogue clearly then, would have given the heads of 12 southern African governments much to mull over. It is an exhortation, urging them to act together to outsmart the rich who in the name of globalisation might bring perils, far worse than that of the colonial masters of the past. And the

way forward for south African nations is through forging regional smart partnerships.

(END)