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Pursuing smart partnerships

THE Langkawi International Dialogue, the forum that began the search by the South for win-win-win combinations and smart partnerships, is here again. This is the third time Malaysia is hosting the dialogue, which gathers corporate leaders from multinational corporations, scholars as well as government leaders and officials from the South, in an endeavour to close the gap within the South and, to an extent, between the South and the North. It is a platform for Malaysia to explain what Malaysia Incorporated is all about, while it in turn learns what makes other countries and companies tick. As in past dialogues, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who opened the LID 97 last night, is again expected to be very involved from start to finish.

His interest reflects the importance Malaysia attaches to the LID. The presence of heads of governments from several countries shows that Malaysia is not alone in wanting to develop synergies between countries and their companies. Mistaken initially for a talk-shop for poor countries, the LID, the Third World's answer to the Davao dialogue in Switzerland, has grown both in dimension and credibility to become a meeting point for those who seek to improve ties between developing countries beyond the conventional means.

Through the LID, participants have been made more aware of how little they know each other and how much potential there is for their countries or companies to merge resources for mutual benefit. At governmental level, the Langkawi Dialogue has inspired leaders in Southern Africa to hold a similar dialogue. In March this year, the inaugural Southern Africa International Dialogue was convened in Botswana and the results have been most encouraging. Dr Mahathir was invited as a special guest at the SAID, which saw the participating countries reach a resolve to hold more such dialogues. At the micro level, companies have begun to realise the potential for cooperation and some have identified joint venture projects. Partnerships have been struck between companies from the same country and across borders.

However, as Dr Mahathir said in his opening address yesterday, there are still partnerships in the world - at the very highest level of international gathering at that - that are not too smart. The Prime Minister said that even at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) level, there is forced partnership between rich and poor, with the poor being forced to accept the terms and conditions imposed by the rich. At the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation (Apec) some years ago, there were attempts to create what the richer member countries called "a level playing field". In the United Nations, of course, permanent members of the Security Council have veto powers to rule out anything the majority decides.

At the WTO, for example, it is regarded fair and proper for the powerful corporations and banks of developed nations to compete with the puny industries and banks of poor developing countries. The poor countries must open up their markets to the rich because the rich are prepared to open up their markets to the poor. That the poor countries have no products to sell to the rich, nor banks nor industries to take advantage of the markets of the rich is considered irrelevant. The WTO has also been the platform where attempts were made by the richer members to link trade and labour rights, human rights and Mother Nature's rights.

The search for smart partnerships is still at a very early stage and

fortunately, the LID is not the only forum where it is being sought. Positive changes are being pursued at the UN, with the recent reforms announced by its secretary-general Kofi Annan. At Apec and the WTO, Malaysia and other developing countries have found the ability to speak with one voice to promote their interests. But at the same time, some countries will not stop forcing their own brand of partnership upon others, demanding all for the little they give. In view of this, the LID has become even more relevant today and the pursuit for smart partnerships has to be intensified.

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