

Smart way of doing business

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Seven African leaders held a series of "smart partnership" meetings with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the Second Southern Africa International Dialogue last week. The networking sessions, which grew from an idea born in Langkawi three years ago, appear to be the way of the future for developing nations to do business together, reports M. VEERA PANDIYAN.

SWAKOP is the name of a river which meanders through the Samib desert and flows into the Atlantic Ocean. Mund means "river mouth" in German, the language of Namibia's former colonial masters.

As it is for several months of the year, Suakop was dry last week when seven heads of states and governments from the region took time off to attend the second Southern Africa International Dialogue (SAID '98) at the Bavarian-style resort town of Swakopmund.

Just like the river, the event looked dry to members of the media covering it, especially so when there was no exciting news to report as the countries involved were faced with more urgent domestic problems.

Current issues ranged from exceptionally high crime rates and frequent border disputes, to an impending civil war in Angola which is likely to draw in its neighbours.

"Isn't this dialogue just a lot of hot air?" asked one sceptical journalist at the opening press conference. SAID's host, Namibian President Dr Sam Nujoma, was amused by the question but begged to differ.

The former South West African People's Organisation (Swapo) guerilla leader, with his trade-mark white beard, explained that successive meetings following the Langkawi Dialogue of 1995 had spawned hubs of

tial projects which could be shared and the Asian currency crisis.

The surprise participation of American singing star Stevie Wonder in one of the sessions was another notable highlight.

The first meeting comprising all heads of states in which Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad initiated discussion on "East Asia Economic Turmoil - Lessons from Malaysia's Experience", drew much attention from both participants and the media.

Dr Mahathir stressed that it would be wrong to dismiss the currency crisis merely as a South-East Asian problem. "South Africa has already been hit. Other countries are expected to face the problem too," he warned.

Speaking on behalf of the other African leaders later, Dr Nujoma later said: "We have learnt some very important lessons from Dr Mahathir. We are now more prepared to grapple with the issue of currency trading.

"We realise that although we have become independent nations, we are still vulnerable."

When all was discussed and done, it was clear that two leaders made lasting impressions on the participants and observers. One was South Africa's executive deputy president Thabo Mbeki who urged African states to break out of their existing "poor image" moulds.

smart partnerships in Africa, the Caribbean and East Asia.

"This impressive gathering is a clear testimony of the extent to which the idea and practice of dialogues on smart partnerships have grown into a powerful international movement," he said.

What exactly is a smart partnership? In a nutshell, it means effective networking for wealth generation. The idea behind such partnerships was first mooted during the 1995 Langkawi Dialogue.

Dr Nujoma, who was among the pioneer participants of the Langkawi meeting, said such partnerships were relationships between governments, the private sector and labour which enhanced the well-being of all parties.

The unusual format of the dialogues at Swakopmund did not make it any easier for the media to grasp what was actually going on in the sessions.

For instance, there were no recorded statements and no press coverage of most of the sessions. The meetings were run by "moderators" instead of chairmen to encourage dialogues in conversational modes.

Each session also had "interveners" who made brief commentaries related to the key theme, and "facilitators" who gave examples, shared experiences and reported back to the concluding session on consensus reached on the themes.

Under such complicated proceedings, one could not blame the press for the lack of enthusiasm, considering that there were other exciting stories to be written.

But, as the sessions continued into the second and third days, SAID became increasingly newsworthy.

Besides the conflict in Angola and other domestic problems, the meetings covered a myriad of issues - economic cooperation between the states, Afro-Asian links and networks, poten-

The other was Dr Mahathir, the only non-African leader at the dialogue, who urged developing nations not to accept the "new religion of globalisation" blindly.

Mbeki, speaking off the cuff in his slow but clear style, said Africa had far too long drawn attention for the wrong reasons.

"When there was war in Somalia, the impression given to the world was 'Something is wrong with Africa.'

"When the presidency of a country was stolen, again the perception was 'Something is wrong with Africa,'" he said, urging the media to be responsible in reporting or clarifying reports.

But his description of Dr Mahathir as a "rebel with a cause" leader set the stage for the Prime Minister's hard-hitting closing speech at the end of the dialogue.

Dr Mahathir started off by stressing that he was "not a racist, anti-white or anti-European."

"But I notice that ethnic Europeans have an infinite capacity to convince themselves that, whatever it is that they are doing at the moment, it is right, proper and just."

His point? The proponents of Western policies and ideologies have been wrong far too many times to be taken seriously, and that African nations and other developing countries should tread carefully when opening up their economies under the concept of globalisation.

In the end, it could not be denied that SAID '98 ended on a positive note with more leaders convinced that "smart partnership" was the solution for the future.

Asked by a reporter what exactly the dialogue in Swakopmund had achieved, all the leaders turned to Dr Mahathir for the reply.

"For one thing, it covered more issues than all the questions asked by the media," the Prime Minister said.