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Classy, eloquent speeches that highlight bond of friendship

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MALAYSIA'S affinity with the people of South Africa is reciprocated by the South Africans.

This bond was highlighted by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he opened the Malaysian chancery in Pretoria on July 24.

He said the new building symbolised Malaysia's commitment and friendship with South Africa.

A few days later, South Africa's Deputy President Thabo Mbeki, reciprocated the sentiments at the second Southern Africa International Dialogue held in the Namibian resort city of Swakopmund.

The sea resort is located about 30km from Walvis Bay, the Namibian port city also famous for its flamingoes. At high tide, dolphins would make their way near the coast and could be easily seen playing in the water.

As in similar dialogues, there are banquets where guest speakers are invited to speak their minds freely, openly and frankly. This has been one of the trademarks of such dialogues, initiated by Dr Mahathir in 1995 in Langkawi under the label of Smart Partnership.

Mbeki was given the floor on Monday night, a day after the start of SAID which ended yesterday. The banquet was televised live by Namibian television.

Mbeki, the next most important South African leader after Nelson Mandela, who also shares a special relationship with Dr Mahathir, referred to the Malaysian as a rebel, much like himself.

This, he said, was because Dr Mahathir has a habit of speaking his mind against the injustices brought about by unfair practices of the world's powerful capitalist figures.

Mbeki's classy presentation was just as eloquent as Dr Mahathir, who spoke the following night. Mbeki presented a perspective quite similar to Dr Mahathir on the issue of misinterpretation of the African continent.

If Mbeki spoke out against the mistreatment of the African continent by western media giants, Dr Mahathir spoke of the hand-maidens of the people with unlimited capital.

The hand-maidens, Dr Mahathir said, are the great writers, journalists and economists, the media practitioners who propagate the religion of capitalism with fervour.

"And like all religious fanatics, they tolerate no recalcitrance," Dr Mahathir said.

Indeed, Mbeki was eloquent in his praise of Dr Mahathir, whose tone of speech at the banquet was just as truthful, thought-provoking and hard-hitting as the latter's.

Thus, it was easy to understand the affinity which Dr Mahathir spoke of previously, an affinity driven perhaps by the two men's common pursuit of a better life for their peoples.

Mbeki spoke of the misrepresentation of facts inflicted by western media practitioners. When conflict broke out in Somalia, it was seen as if the conflict affected the whole of Africa; when a presidency was "stolen" in one country, it was depicted as if the whole of Africa was plagued by such undemocratic tendencies.

Mbeki called on his African colleagues and fellow men to work hard to help clear these misrepresentation, saying that such distortion of facts would grossly undermine Africa's attempts to rid itself of economic apartheid and to work towards meaningful political stability so that peace

can flourish and Man can get out of the depths of poverty and despair.

Mbeki called on his colleagues to rise above their own shortcomings and work towards a smart partnership where all would win and none would lose.

Right from the start of his speech, Mbeki warned diners that some of his points may seem unpalatable, but they were intended to spur the rest of Africa to progress and prosper.

Dr Mahathir, whose views against the norms are well-known and who is not averse to making equally strong reference against what he argued as injustices brought about by unfettered liberalisation, was quite predictable in his speech.

"I am not a racist nor am I anti-white or anti-European, but I cannot help but notice that ethnic Europeans have an infinite capacity to convince themselves that whatever it is they may be doing at the moment is right, is proper, is just.

"Thus when they were colonising us, exploiting our wealth in Asia, Africa and the Americas, even warring and killing us, they were able to convince themselves that it was a burden imposed on them by God, a cross that they must bear; for what they were doing was to civilise the natives and to bring cultures and religions to them," Dr Mahathir said.

At the end of SAID, much understanding was created, many perspectives were laid out by the likes of Mbeki and Dr Mahathir. As in previous dialogues, the talk show was not designed to yield immediate, concrete results.

The networking and the intellectual interaction would prove extremely beneficial in the long run. And rebels with a cause, such as Mbeki and Dr Mahathir, had in their own way mapped out the future course of such inter-continental dialogues and people-to-people understanding.

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