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NAM emerges united despite the diverse issues raised in Durban

Syed Nazri in Durban

THE 12th Non-Aligned Movement Summit ended well into the night at the Durban International Convention Centre on Thursday because everyone wanted a chance to speak.

The closing ceremony could not be held at 7pm as scheduled as there were still delegates queueing to take to the rostrum. The speakers were given 10 minutes each but some, as usual, took up to 40 minutes.

Workers were already dismantling canopies and stacking up chairs before the last speaker took the stage.

That's what you get when you have a two-day summit with 114 member nations participating - and with world politics and economics as the main agenda.

Even Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who represented Malaysia at the summit, could only deliver the Prime Minister's speech at 7.30pm, four hours behind schedule.

In that sense, the detractors are right - the NAM summit IS another talk shop. But, minus all the rhetoric, is it really?

In substance it is not. And the many bomb scares that occurred in Durban over the week, plus the extremely tight security on the city streets gave the summit, which was preceded by meetings at senior officials and ministerial levels, a sense of importance.

It is not a talk shop, according to South African President Nelson Mandela who said that through discussions, member countries were now beginning to realise the need for more self-engagement and engagement with the developed countries.

"We have come to accept this to be part of the international system under the new world order instead of scolding from the sidelines," he said at the conference.

He is saying that NAM, founded in 1961 when the United States and the then Soviet Union were in a Cold War, is still relevant.

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad seemed to have the same message, even though he could not be present as he had to stay back in Malaysia to attend to important domestic matters.

In a speech read to Abdullah, the Prime Minister said NAM was a useful forum because even though the Cold War had ended, the scenario is similar - what with the big powers using economic might to subjugate smaller nations and sometimes using military might to bully.

It also has to be considered that the Durban summit was held against the background of a turbulent international environment.

The financial crisis has created havoc to the economies of several NAM countries. And on the political front, NAM was seized with a number of burning issues such as Palestine, Iraq, Libya, Sudan and Congo.

It also had to deal with nuclear disarmament, United Nations reform and terrorism. The final document endorsed at the end of the summit tackled the issue of the financial crisis the way Malaysia would have wanted it.

In it, developed countries were urged to act in concert with developing countries, the IMF and World Bank to review the world financial system to ensure that short-term capital flows were supportive of expanding trade, employment and development.

NAM also called for regulations and more transparency on currency trading.

It was also noted that globalisation and liberalisation did not result

in increased economic opportunity for developing countries.

The summit also condemned, as an act of aggression, the US air attack on the El-Shifa Pharmaceutical Plant in Sudan on Aug 20, describing it as a unilateral act in violation of the UN Charter.

On nuclear disarmament, NAM said the recent tests in the Indian sub-continent were a setback to global efforts to eliminate nuclear arsenals. But diplomacy prevented India and Pakistan to be specifically mentioned in the document.

Again the issue on UN Security Council reform was highlighted. The council, it was noted, should be expanded according to geographical distribution and veto power in the hands of the five permanent members be abolished.

Terrorism was condemned and, especially mentioned, were the bombings that occurred in Nairobi and Dar-es-Salam on Aug 7.

The summit stressed the need to combat terrorism in all its forms regardless of the race, religion or nationality of the victims or perpetrators.

Abdullah said despite the difficult issues NAM had to address, it managed to emerge still united.

Malaysian officials say the country was still very much committed to NAM as an important political and economic force in the same way as Dr Mahathir had put it.

Since the UN had not been very effective, NAM provides an alternative forum to promote views of developing countries.

Dr Mahathir had said: "Our only hope lies in staying together. The relevance of being non-aligned today may be questioned.

"But there are many reasons for us to stay together. Divided, one by one we will succumb. In unity there is a chance we will survive and possibly retain our integrity and independence."

NAM will have its next summit in 2001 in Dhaka, Bangladesh.

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