

29/07/1998

Poor nations now under siege, says PM

Ahirudin Attan in Swakopmund (Namibia)

SWAKOPMUND (Namibia), Tues: The need to be united against the unfettered globalisation process has become very acute, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad warns African leaders in a speech urging developing countries to open up their economies in their own time and when they are ready.

Picking up from where he left off at the first Southern Africa International Dialogue (SAID) over a year ago, the Prime Minister said at the second SAID tonight that the developing world "is now under siege".

At the first SAID in Kasane, Botswana, Dr Mahathir had spoken of the dangers of unfettered globalisation and of the need for developing nations to present a untied front and to form smart partnerships to face these challenges.

"When I said all those things... I had no inkling of the economic catastrophe that was soon to befall my country and the other countries of prosperous and dynamic South-East Asia.

"I had every faith in the milk of human kindness, in the belief that in this day and age the exploitation of the poor by the rich is a thing of the past and modern civilisation would not allow it to come back.

"Now, I know otherwise," he said in his address entitled "Governance and Smart Partnership". Fourteen countries participated in the dialogue, seven of which are represented by heads of government.

Dr Mahathir said he is not racist or 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".

In the colonial days, they convinced themselves that what they were doing was to civilise the natives and to bring culture and religions to them.

"They called it the white man's burden. If in the process the natives were oppressed it was incidental and quite unavoidable," he added.

In their own countries, the capitalists exploited their own working classes, convinced that it was right. After the collapse of the Communist bloc, they wanted the whole world for the maximum deployment of their capital. To them capital must be free to go anywhere regardless of borders.

The justification for this, they explain, is that their capital would enrich the poor countries and create a better and richer society.

"It is the white man's burden all over again, only this time no gunboats. Money does a better job."

In the attacks on South-East Asia's currencies and stock markets, "we are told that these things are happening because our governments are corrupt and our countries are badly run", he said.

The Western media, meanwhile, said the South-East Asian governments are to be blamed because they are not transparent and they practise crony-capitalism and nepotism.

"We are told that this is how the globalised world functions... that this turmoil, all this impoverishment of our people and our countries, is good for us because they will help us to get good government, help us attract foreign investments."

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia believes in globalisation and wants the prosperity that a free flow of capital can bring.

"But what we are experiencing is not prosperity but massive

impoverishment.

"Since this is not what we expect, since this is not what is good for us, can we not ask that there be some rules and regulations governing the flow of capital? But we are told currency trading is special, it cannot be regulated or made transparent. It cannot be taxed. It is the essence of a free market."

For them, globalisation, deregulation, liberalisation and the borderless world are the fundamentals of the new theology.

"The high priests are the people with capital, unlimited capital. Their hand-maidens are the great writers, journalists, and economists, the media practitioners who propagate the religion with fervour.

"And like all religious fanatics they tolerate no recalcitrance."

Dr Mahathir said while he believes globalisation is a great idea whose time has come, countries must globalise carefully and slowly and recognise that they are not all of the same strength or level of development.

Malaysia, for example, cannot have an automotive industry if it had no borders. He said the industry is protected because there is no way Malaysia could go into it if foreign cars were allowed into the country tax-free or at very low import duties.

"Clearly for Malaysia, industrialisation has been made possible because we erect barriers at our borders," he added.

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