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Recent events ensure new lease of life for NAM

Syed Nadzri in Durban

THE Non-Aligned Movement, feared to be heading into obscurity because of its fading role in the post-Cold War era, is likely to get a new lease of life at its 12th summit in Durban over the next few days.

Quite a few events of late have made sure of that - notably the financial and economic crises spreading beyond East Asia, as well as the perceived comeback of terrorism and international aggression.

The misapprehensions over NAM had a lot to do with the established belief that the movement, which had its first summit in Belgrade 37 years ago, was formed only to tackle concerns over the once-accelerating arms race between the then Soviet Union and the United States which could lead to a nuclear war.

When the last summit ended in Cartagena, Colombia on Oct 20, 1995, that enduring question of NAM having outlived its relevance rang out loud. The world was looking good then.

It would have persisted at the triennial summit this time around. But how ironic that killings, not only human, but also of national economies, had to take place for this group of 113 nations to come alive again.

One thing's for sure - Malaysia is not letting go another chance of getting the international community to take stock of the problems that are causing havoc to share and financial markets in many countries.

The consistency with which Malaysia has been taking up the issue is clear.

It did so at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in Edinburgh last October, followed in quick succession by other high-profile forums - the Group of 15 summit and the Asean informal summit both in Kuala Lumpur, the second Asia-Europe meeting in London, a special G15 summit in Cairo and the Asean Foreign Ministers meeting in Manila.

Foreign Ministry deputy secretary-general II N Parameswaran expects the issue to figure even more prominently at the Durban meet because more and more countries, even the host, South Africa, are being affected.

Malaysian officials believe this issue has lots of relevance in many other ways to the movement - like linking it to attempts by certain big powers to re-colonise emerging economies.

It is understood that moves are under way to include this issue in the final document of the summit so that it would appropriately reflect the gravity of the situation facing member countries.

The organisers are understandably upbeat about the whole scenario as could be seen from the expressions of secretary-general of the summit Aziz Pahad and other key officials who briefed the Press on Thursday evening.

Aziz, who is South Africa's deputy Foreign Minister, confidently said this summit would never turn out to be a waste of time.

"Of course it won't be another talk-shop. Otherwise we would not have agreed to host it," he quipped.

The Durban meeting starts at senior officials level over the weekend followed by preparatory sessions by Foreign Ministers on Monday and Tuesday. The heads of Government will then start their two-day summit on Wednesday.

The official list provided by the organisers indicates that 53 of the 113 member countries will be represented by their heads of government.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is due to arrive on Tuesday, enhancing his good attendance record at international forums of

this nature.

He is due to speak on the first day of the plenary session for the heads on Wednesday evening.

Among the others said to be making their way are Cuba's Fidel Castro, Iran's Mohammad Khatami, India's Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Pakistan's Nawaz Sharif, Sudan's Omar Al-Bashir and Afghanistan's Mohammad Rabbani.

The basic framework of discussion of the NAM summit will still revolve around topics such as the impact of globalisation, trade liberalisation, nuclear disarmament, the eradication of poverty, human rights and South-South cooperation.

But Aziz maintained that this did not mean the leaders would be confined just to these because there will not be specific items on the agenda and "anyone is free to bring up any issue" for discussion.

Another issue-of-the-moment is the horror bombings occurring of late, and the recent United States missile strikes on alleged terrorist targets in Afghanistan and Sudan which have caused international uproar.

The US may have a representative present as an observer who will also hold a watching brief of sorts but as of now, the superpower's presence in Durban could not be confirmed.

What is more or less confirmed is that United Nations secretary-general Kofi Anan will also be by the sidelines at the summit.

Malaysia is expected to remain consistent on this issue and that is to deplore terrorism of any kind and to condemn the US for the missile strikes.

Other key issues expected to figure are nuclear disarmament in the light of tests carried out recently by India and Pakistan, UN sanctions on Libya and the usual matters related to South-South cooperation.

Applications for membership by Bosnia and Belarus are also on the cards. Malaysia is giving its full support to both.

But while Belarus is likely to be a breeze, Bosnia will remain a problem like it did at the last summit when certain countries like Zimbabwe opposed its inclusion.

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