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Call for stronger global aid response

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KUALA LUMPUR, Thurs. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today called for a stronger international response to help the rural poor, especially women, who have been made poorer by the current economic crisis.

The Prime Minister said this should be the case because Governments could not abandon their responsibilities to the people who elected them.

The recession, he added, could be a catalyst for a social and political re-think of domestic and global economic strategy.

"We must put our heads together to come up with ways and means to ward off economic threats and instantaneous changes," he said.

He was speaking at the opening of the Third International Steering Committee on the Economic Advancement of Rural Women (ISC) meeting at the Palace of the Golden Horses.

Dr Mahathir said poverty was particularly acute for rural women, female-headed households, indigenous women, the urban poor and migratory workers.

"The creation and enjoyment of global wealth are very uneven and as developing countries continue to struggle with deteriorating terms of trade, debts and structural adjustments, the basic needs of the people are greatly compromised."

Dr Mahathir said the impact of the credit crunch and high interest rates, as a result of the economic downturn, had been paralysing.

"Rural women who are already poorer than others in their countries become acutely impoverished.

"Enhanced economic activities which is acknowledged as the way out of poverty for rural women becomes extremely difficult as such activities require credit to continue functioning."

Dr Mahathir said beyond mobilising financial support, the international community should act in unison to overcome the problems of the world's poor.

"We see for ourselves the immense misery inflicted on people - men, women and children - all over the developing world.

"Focus must be on preventing such a crisis from ever happening again and to protect people from the consequences of economic collapse," he said.

Dr Mahathir said assistance of multilateral and bilateral lenders should aim at immediately overcoming the poverty of the already poor directly.

"Endless discussions on the so-called 'new architecture' of the world financial system will not do much good for those who may die in the meantime," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the financial crisis brought about by currency speculation and manipulation, which began in Thailand last year had spread to other countries in Asia, resulting in rapid increase in poverty.

He said in one Asian country with a very big population, the reduction in the number below poverty line had reversed.

"Where before only 20 per cent were below the poverty line, now almost 50 per cent had fallen below the poverty line," Dr Mahathir said.

He added that the currency devaluation and the subsequent economic recession had hit the rural poor most, in particular women.

"The situation is not helped much by self-aggrandising pronouncements from speculators with sanctimonious attitudes who appear on international media networks making unjustifiable attacks on the stricken countries and urging investors to pull out their money to invest in more lucrative markets," Dr Mahathir said.

He said their callous call betrayed a cruel blindness to the plight of millions of people who had been impoverished by the economic downturn and dehumanised the social costs borne by the countries.

Dr Mahathir said no one had been spared from the economic crisis, from the large corporations to the ordinary women and men in the street.

Also present at the opening ceremony were Queen Fabiola of Belgium and out-going president of the ICS Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali.

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