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### Valuable lessons from Dr M for SAID partners

Ahirudin Attan in Swakopmund (Namibia)

SWAKOPMUND (Namibia): In the end, when the media wanted to know what benefits and progress the Southern African International Dialogue (SAID) had to show, all heads turned to the only non-African leader who attended the dialogue.

"That question is best answered by Dr Mahathir bin Mohamad," said Namibian president Dr Sam Nujoma who, as host, was chairing the SAID concluding joint press conference here late yesterday.

Before this particular question was posed, and passed to the Malaysian Prime Minister to answer, Nujoma and his colleagues from the other Southern African states who came for the four-day dialogue, had been bombarded with questions quite irrelevant to SAID, and the focus was on on-going conflicts, potential conflicts or imagined conflicts affecting their countries.

More or less what the press corp - including some representatives from the international media - was interested in was how one country in the region was going to react because its neighbour was behaving in a certain way.

For example, was Walvis Bay about 30km from here going to be used as a base to help the neighbouring Angolan forces launch their offensive on a rebel group?

Was it true that Nujoma had thrown his support for South African President Nelson Mandela in a purported conflict between Mandela and Zimbabwe President Robert Mugabe?

Indeed, the focus on Africa and the perspective of outsiders, as pointed out by South Africa executive deputy president Thabo Mbeki, has been for all the wrong reasons.

"When conflict broke out in Somalia, for example, the impression was that 'something is terribly wrong in Africa'. When a presidency of a country was 'stolen', the foreigners concluded that all of Africa has the same 'undemocratic tendencies'," he said.

Mbeki laid the blame partly on the media, just as members of the press at the news conference were openly criticised by the African leaders for invariably failing to print denials and clarifications on their front pages, where the original stories that were subject of the denial or clarification were printed.

Dr Mahathir, in his response to the question of how SAID has benefited the countries, said the dialogue certainly covered more issues than the few that were dictating the line of questioning at the press conference.

"I think it is quite clear that we have been making progress. (Since the LID in 1995) the dialogues have attracted more and more participation and leaders."

Here in Swakopmund, the Prime Minister said the leaders discussed the possibility of bringing in more segments of society into the smart partnership.

"We started (at LID) with governments and the private sector, and later we included the trade unions. Now we are proposing to bring in all of you (the media) ... I am sure you are better at answering the questions you have been asking, many of which are not very relevant to the issues," he said.

SAID could not, of course, run away from discussing the conflicts and the politics of the region. The presence of leaders of so many countries

under one tent, in fact, provides a good opportunity to resolve some of them.

The Angola issue, for example, was discussed over a lunch session, resulting in a communique backing the existing Angolan Government.

But there were other more universal issues discussed, issues that would benefit the population in general. These included economic cooperation, cross-border joint projects, Afro-Asia links, and, of course, the currency crisis.

"This is not a South-East Asian problem only. South Africa is already affected and this will affect the neighbouring countries," Dr Mahathir told the press conference when asked what SAID had been able to learn from Malaysia about the currency crisis.

Nujoma said the leaders who attended the dialogue have learnt "very important lessons" from Dr Mahathir and Malaysia's experience. The countries of Southern Africa are now better prepared, at least mentally.

"We are aware that even as we succeed as nations, we are going to be still vulnerable," he said.

The birth of this awareness - knowing what one is up against and what one must do in the event of currency attacks on one's country - is one important achievement at the dialogue.

The Southern African countries are now in a better position, certainly better than the countries of South-East Asia when their currencies were attacked last year, to deal with a crisis that will not be of their doing.

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