

07/09/1999

## An assembly for the legal fraternity

Carolyn Hong

SOME 950 lawyers from around the world have signed up for the 12th Commonwealth Law Conference to be held from Monday to Thursday next week.

This is not a bad response, by any measure, and the Bar Council has reason to be optimistic that the figure would reach 1,000 by the time the conference starts next Monday.

Figures are, of course, not the sole measure of a conference's success but in this case, figures have a special significance because of the rumours which had dogged the conference in recent weeks.

It isn't often that a law conference becomes the target of rumours but thanks to uncanny timing, this one had such unfortunate experience.

Rumours had it that the conference would be moved to another venue because of the negative reports over Malaysia for the past one year and that registrations were a mere trickle.

Even now, these rumours are still circulating and lawyers and speakers have been calling the Bar Council for enquiries.

Organising committee co-chairman Datuk Dr Cyrus Das admitted that there were initial apprehensions about holding the conference in Malaysia.

"But they have substantially been overcome."

He also said the Commonwealth Lawyers' Association had never for one moment intended or asked to have the conference shifted. "As long as we were prepared to organise it, they were prepared to have it here," he said.

Bar Council president R.R. Chelvarajah agreed. He said it was the council's commitment to the law which prompted it to put in a bid to host the conference six years ago in Cyprus.

Bids were also put in by Kenya and Hong Kong.

Of the 950 registered participants, about half are foreigners representing almost every Commonwealth country.

Among them are a substantial number of Chief Justices, judges and Attorneys-General, as well as lawyers and academics. Malaysian participants include senior lawyers, judges and government lawyers from the Attorney-General's Chambers.

Chelvarajah said the council appreciated the support shown by its members, the government, judiciary and A-G's Chambers. The judiciary has provided a few judges as speakers and a few more as participants while the A-G's Chambers is sending a big group led by Solicitor-General Datuk Heliliah Yusof.

On top of that, Chief Justice Tun Mohd Eusoff Chin has agreed to adjourn all cases to enable lawyers to attend the conference. Eusoff himself will be speaking at the opening ceremony and will chair a meeting of Chief Justices.

The conference carries the theme "Law And Society in the 21st Century" and holds much promise for an interesting time.

The four days are packed with a series of no-holds-barred speakers beginning with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad whose views, even critics must agree, are never dull.

Dr Mahathir will open the conference.

The keynote address will be delivered by Nobel laureate, author and human rights activist Wole Soyinka who will speak on "Democracy, Freedom and the Individual".

Former Deputy Prime Minister Tan Sri Musa Hitam is also among the key