

09/11/1999

Commonwealth leaders meet at crucial juncture

Nuraina Samad

WHEN the Commonwealth heads of government meet from November 12 to 15 in Durban, South Africa, it will be their last gathering before the new millennium.

It is a crucial time as they look at the challenges ahead, make re-assessments and decisions that will see the 54-nation grouping of mainly former British colonies into the next century.

The theme for this year's Commonwealth Heads of Government Meeting (CHOGM), "People Centred Development: The Challenge of Globalisation", is relevant to its members, of which 50 are developing nations.

It is during this time, at the end of the century and the start of the new millennium, that many questions will take on greater significance.

Globalisation is a major challenge for the Commonwealth, hence discussion of its impact on member nations will take priority.

Commonwealth Secretary-General Chief Emeka Anyaoku, who steps down from the post in April next year, in London said the leaders were expected to work out measures to assist member nations in managing the impact of globalisation.

The Commonwealth knows only too well that if globalisation is not sensibly managed countries within it will be marginalised and lose control of their economies.

While globalisation is indisputably a relevant issue to the Commonwealth, Pakistan's temporary suspension from the grouping after a military coup on October 12 is also of much concern.

Pakistan's army, led by General Pervaiz Musharraf, ousted Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif's Government on that day.

The decision to suspend Pakistan was made by the Commonwealth Ministerial Action Group (CMAG) at a meeting in London a week later.

The CMAG was set up in accordance with the Harare Declaration and the Millbrook Commonwealth Action programme, and acts as a human rights watchdog for the grouping.

The meeting in London is expected to endorse the suspension which came 10 years after it was readmitted into the Commonwealth as its 49th member after an absence of 17 years.

The coup, though bloodless, was in violation of the fundamental principles of human rights, democracy, and good governance of the Commonwealth.

Until there is restoration of democracy in Pakistan, its membership will remain suspended.

Four Commonwealth envoys, the first overseas delegation to tour Pakistan since Sharif was ousted, met Musharraf. They made an assessment, and will make their recommendation to the CHOGM.

Musharraf is confident they will not carry out a threat to recommend that Pakistan's provisional suspension from the Commonwealth be made permanent.

Another item on the agenda is the election of a new secretary-general to succeed Anyaoku who assumed the position in July 1990.

In the running are Bangladesh's Special Envoy of the Prime Minister Farooq Sobhan, and New Zealand's Foreign Minister Don McKinnon.

Farooq had put forth the argument that it was time for the Commonwealth to have an Asian secretary-general as it never had one in its 50 years history.

He said Asia should have its turn because Asian countries were the earliest members of the modern Commonwealth. Moreover, Asians constitute more than 75 per cent of the "population" of the organisation.

Whoever is elected will take over from a man credited with making the organisation into a credible force in promoting democracy, respect of human rights, and good governance.

Anyaoku played a key role in the dismantling of apartheid in South Africa, and in helping Nigeria return to the Commonwealth.

Nigeria's membership was frozen in 1995 after it executed Ken Saro-Wiwa, and eight human rights activists.

However, it fulfilled the requirements of holding presidential elections last February to end 15 years of military rule.

The theme of this biennial gathering is a take-off from the fundamentals set to make the organisation more relevant and effective in dealing with the "dominant reality of our age", quoting Anyaoku.

The fears of globalisation are real, and the threat of marginalisation in the new century is serious.

Anyaoku said globalisation "has brought about a phenomenal expansion in the world of trade, finance and investment, and produced new technologies which have shrunk time and space and in the process transformed the world almost out of recognition from what it was only a few decades ago".

The world saw abundant wealth for some, and poverty for others.

For this reason and given that the Commonwealth is made up of developing and poor countries, the issue of globalisation is apt.

For Malaysia, it is under the best of circumstances and platforms to offer the country's experience.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who has gained the reputation among African nations as a vocal critic of Western imperialism and economic monopoly in the new world order, will lead the Malaysian delegation.

He is also regarded as a friend and a big brother who is ready to lend a helping hand.

The Commonwealth has become an entity close to the Prime Minister. When he first took office, Dr Mahathir had little love for it, saying that Malaysia was disenchanted with it.

But as his involvement in international issues heightened, in particular that of apartheid, he said: "In a way, Malaysia has rediscovered the Commonwealth. We admit that we were disenchanted but in an increasingly inter-dependent world, the Commonwealth provides an important forum for the discussion, and even settlement of some international problems."

"We also see a role for ourselves in the Commonwealth, small though it may be," he said.

For the Commonwealth leaders, it will be business as usual although the task has become formidable as it moves into a century that is full of insecurities and uncertainties.

(END)