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MAHATHIR-ISLAMIC

DR M: ISLAMIC NATIONS MUST USE STRENGTHS FOR MUTUAL BENEFIT

By: Mikhail Raj Abdullah

DHAKA, March 1 (Bernama) -- Islamic countries must mobilise their assets and intrinsic strengths for mutual benefit to triumph in the ever-challenging global arena, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said here today.

"There are enough skills and intellect in the Muslim world which can be put to good use and help us rebuild our nations to catch up with the rest of the world," the prime minister said in his speech at the second summit of the group of eight Islamic developing countries (D-8) currently being held here.

"However, they are now applying their gifts elsewhere because we cannot provide them with facilities they need," he said.

"We have to bring them back, we have to create an environment that is attractive to them and conducive to their work," he said.

The D-8, set up in Istanbul in June 1997 groups Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkey, aims to improve economic co-operation through manageable and concrete projects.

The summit was earlier opened by Bangladeshi Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina. Among other leaders of the D-8 present were President Suleyman Demirel of Turkey and Prime Minister Nawaz Sharif of Pakistan.

With squabbles and political differences dividing the Muslim world, Dr Mahathir said there was no time for personal ambitions and petty quarrels as they were really ill-prepared to cope with the threats facing them.

He said the D-8 was attempting to cope with a world which has become as threatening as when the Muslim empires were under seige.

Calling for greater Islamic unity, he said that "we must look at the world from the point of view of the ummah as a whole."

"There is only one reason for us to be together, to talk to each other -- and that is because we see benefit in working together and in recognising our mutual responsibility," he said.

Dr Mahathir said there was a great deal of wealth and potential among Islamic nations but they have not contributed to the well-being or the progress of the rest.

"None of us can claim to be a force of consequence in the international arena today," he said.

"While we are in the 15th century, the rest of the world seems to be in the 20th century. They are now approaching the 21st century and the third millenium.

"In many ways, they seem to be centuries ahead of us and now they have introduced new ideas and technologies which we are not prepared for and we are seemingly unable to handle," he said.

For instance, "the concept about democratic governments have been largely mishandled by us whereby the countries enjoy the rights conferred but do not seem to recognise that along with the rights come the need for responsibility," he said.

Dr Mahathir also cautioned Islamic countries against the downside of globalisation whereby a country's wealth could be exploited to benefit others but not the country itself.

Another danger, he said, was the free flow of capital across borders which gave a free hand to speculators having more money than national governments to attack currencies with devastating effects.

"They have used our money to invest in our countries and then suddenly

pull out their investments in order to destabilise and impoverish us," he said, adding that Malaysia was a victim of such speculation with its wealth diminished significantly.

"Clearly, we are not adept in the use of our wealth and free flow of capital, a lot of our own money is held hostage abroad and actually used against us," he added.

He told the gathering of Islamic countries that attacks on currencies and stock markets were just the beginning.

"We can be assured that newer interpretations of globalisation will be made which will open up newer ways for the exploitation of the poor by the rich," said Dr Mahathir. -- BERNAMA

MR SHY