

16 OCT 1999

South (News Focus)

M'SIA STEADFAST IN PROMOTING SOUTH-SOUTH COOPERATION

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VICTORIA FALLS (Zimbabwe), Oct 16 (Bernama) -- Malaysia's commitment to the South-South cooperation was again on display during the Third Southern Africa International Dialogue (SAID 99) which concluded here, recently.

Although itself emerging from its worst economic and financial crisis, Malaysia in all earnestness shared its ups and downs in nation-building with African leaders who took part in the Oct 3-6 gathering hosted by President Robert Mugabe.

Declining prices of commodities, war, poverty, heavy debt burden, inflation, high unemployment rate, red tape and the HIV/AIDS scourge, among other things, are shackling the development of not a few African countries.

With such a long list, it is not surprising that many people are writing off Africa, believing that the continent would not be able to catch up with the rest of the world.

Despite hiccups in its proposed investments in the Southern Africa region, Malaysia is steadfast in its belief that countries in the South should band together for their mutual benefit in line with the "Smart Partnership" concept, promulgated by none other than Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

Besides Dr Mahathir, who flew into Victoria Falls following a hectic schedule in New York, the Malaysian delegation comprised senior government officials and prominent members of the private sector who provided inputs in the various SAID 99 discussions.

The prime minister himself said he took every opportunity to explain how the "Smart Partnership" concept was actually carried out in Malaysia.

In essence, the concept is based on the principle that any economy is an integral whole with the general infrastructure, business process and social responsibilities all supporting each other.

Apart from Dr Mahathir, who was the sole Asian leader present in Victoria Falls, SAID 99 saw the participation of leaders and representatives of the 14 member countries of the Southern Africa Development Community (SADC) as well as Ghana, Kenya and Uganda.

SADC, which has a total population of 194 million people, groups Angola, Botswana, Congo, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

Under huge white marquees erected on the grounds of the Elephant Hills Intercontinental Hotel, the participants traded ideas and opinions on various issues ranging from how to move African economies forward in this era of globalisation to economic empowerment of the African people.

The theme of this year's SAID, "Economic Empowerment Through Smart Partnership", reflected the aspiration of stopping the marginalisation of Africans in the economic sector to enable them to play a more active role in the development of their respective countries.

Dr Mahathir provided some insight on how Malaysia went about implementing its own affirmative action programme, the New Economic Policy, after the realisation that the indigenous people were not getting a fair share of the wealth a decade into independence.

Indeed, the clear message from SAID 99 was that economic empowerment would require the creation of an enabling environment in order to reduce poverty and to improve the standard of living of the people.

According to Gideon Gono, managing director and chief executive of the Commercial Bank of Zimbabwe Ltd, one important area that needed attention

was education.

While calling on the SADC to harmonise standards of professional, vocational and technical training, he suggested that students be sent for vocational and technical skills development at the regional level as a deliberate strategy of economic development.

He added that the SADC region -- with a gross national product (GNP) of US\$185 billion in 1997, representing about 57 per cent of the entire GNP of Sub-Saharan Africa -- held the greatest potential to drive the economic fortunes of Africa.

In his keynote address, Mugabe urged the SADC to establish economic development corridors to attract investment while tourism was identified as one of the areas which could be jointly exploited in the region.

Concern over the actions of currency speculators was also heard at Victoria Falls, with Mugabe saying that no economic empowerment initiatives could thrive under the threat of unregulated currency trading.

The Zimbabwean leader said the experiences of both Asia's and Southern and Eastern Africa's worst financial crisis in the last two years, spawned by currency speculators and hedge funds, had alerted developing or emerging markets "to the danger of exposing our markets and financial systems".

"We now demand serious reform to the global financial system in order to stop or regulate currency trading," he added.

Ghanaian President Jerry Rawlings said the extraordinary marshalling of national resolve and commitment by Malaysia to overcome formidable odds should be instructive for African countries as they strived to survive the commodity price slump.

The SAID 2000 will be held in Mozambique.

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