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Mahathir-WTO

STAND UNITED FOR WTO TALKS, SAYS MAHATHIR

By: Abdul Muin Abdul Majid

VICTORIA FALLS (Zimbabwe), Oct 3 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamed said today developing countries must stand united during the World Trade Organisation (WTO) meeting in Seattle next month to prevent them from being pushed around by developed countries.

He said many developing countries shared the Malaysia's views on several issues but Malaysia alone would not be able to defend the rights of developing countries.

"In the WTO, if the developing countries can have a common stand, I think we can do that," he told Malaysian journalists covering his visit here to attend the 3rd Southern Africa International Dialogue (SAID 99) which will be officially opened tonight.

He was asked how developing nations could defend their positions against the more powerful developed countries of the North.

Dr Mahathir said the problem was that some developing countries were under tremendous pressure from various parties.

"They cannot stand united against any proposal made by the North. So, in the WTO meeting in Seattle, the chances are that the policies of the North will just be pushed down the throat of everyone because developing countries are divided," he said.

Prior to that, Dr Mahathir and other African leaders took a one-and-a-half-hour breakfast cruise along the scenic Zambezi River, located not far from the Elephant Hill Inter-continental Hotel, the venue of the three-day conference.

The prime minister was also asked on the recent announcement by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to write-off most of the debts of the highly indebted countries.

He said: "In the first place, I don't understand this writing-off business. If you write-off the debts, it should mean that there's no more debt. But before writing off, they say they will have to sell IMF gold."

He said when the idea of selling the gold was raised, the price of the commodity went down resulting in the closure of mines and people losing their jobs.

"I don't see why they should sell their gold at all. Even if they want to sell, they can do so at some other time," he said.

Dr Mahathir said he always believed that developing countries should be allowed to have tariff barriers until they had the capacity to compete with developed countries.

"But apparently, the IMF which lends money to some of these countries are insisting that they must open their market and lower their tariffs, and this means they will not have any revenue and their own products will not be able to compete," he said.

On the exclusion of Asean members from the recently formed G-20 to discuss issues in the world economy including crisis prevention and the new financial architecture, Dr Mahathir said this would mean that views from countries like Malaysia, which was battered by the economic crisis, would not be heard.

"This is democracy as interpreted by them. We must have democracy in our country which includes, of course, the right to riot, to burn houses and all that.

"But democracy internationally means only the rich and the strong will make decisions, the poor and the weak will have to receive whatever they

decide," he said sarcastically.

The G-20 is a mix of the seven wealthiest nations in G-7, 11 emerging market economies and the World Bank/IMF.

The economies include Argentina, Australia, Brazil, China, India, Mexico, Russia, Saudi Arabia, South Africa, South Korea and Turkey.

On problems encountered by projects initiated by South-South countries including outside interference, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had similar problems regarding its proposed involvement in projects in Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

He said the one in Zimbabwe's Hwange power station project involving the YTL group was due to the fact that the World Bank had its own initiative.

"Although the project might not take off, they appear to be restricting the growth of other people's investments," he said.

Asked what Malaysia could do to overcome the problem, he said: "We try by way of persuasion, what else can we do."

On last night's informal meeting among state and government leaders attending SAID 99, Dr Mahathir said he gave a briefing on the smart partnership concept after being asked to do so.

Dr Mahathir said he also shared his views on how natural resources in southern Africa can be of benefit including in the tourism field.

On economic empowerment through smart partnership which is the theme of this year's dialogue, he said the leaders wanted Africans to play a more active role in their own countries.

He said this was the same with Malaysia when the government introduced the New Economic Policy (DEB) to help Bumiputeras who were then mostly rural folks.

"The problems with the Africans now is that they are not trained, they do not have any capital or managerial skills," he said.

The prime minister said the leadership of African countries possessed the political will to implement similar policies but the respective bureaucracies needed to be improved.

Dr Mahathir is the only leader from outside the African region here.

He is scheduled to deliver a keynote address entitled "Langkawi to Victoria Falls-The Smart Partnership Way" at a dinner tomorrow.

President Robert Mugabe will open the three-day dialogue tonight.

The first edition of SAID was hosted by Botswana, followed by Namibia last year.

Other African leaders attending the dialogue here are President Jerry Rawlings of Ghana, President Bakili Muluzi of Malawi, President Festus G. Mogae of Botswana, Prime Minister of Lesotho Bethuel Pakilitha Mosisili, President Joaquim Alberto Chissano of Mozambique, President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and President Frederick J.T. Chiluba of Zambia.

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