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Staying firm on course

THE swiftness with which the group of eight Islamic developing countries, D8, moves itself beyond the embryonic stage signifies the crossing of an important psychological barrier. It has defied earlier scepticism that, like groupings of its ilk, it would degenerate into yet another talk shop.

That it has managed to rise above the rhetoric over its inception and purpose is partly due to the blunt reminder of Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at its first summit in Istanbul that it should fold up if it fails to realise its objectives. Perhaps, the burden of producing results prove a moderating influence on the diplomatic fanfare accompanying the birth of such a grouping. Act or perish - the message is certainly not lost. Considering that it was conceived less than two years ago, its progress in garnering greater co-operation in various economic fields with the aim of improving the position of developing Islamic countries in the global economy may well put other groupings to shame.

This is no puffery. Hitherto, the D8 has produced a prototype light aircraft for use in agriculture. This would not have succeeded without the collaboration of aviation experts all the D8 countries as well as commitment at the highest government level. In an effort to mobilise its resources, it has created an Aquaculture Information and Monitoring Centre. Such exchange of data is important in facilitating effective joint-ventures and transfer of technology. Malaysia, as the co-ordinator for promoting the potential of Islamic finance and banking plus takaful (Islamic insurance) business, has succeeded in setting up a takaful joint-venture company in Indonesia.

The D8's aim to create new opportunities in trade ties, earlier scoffed at by many as lofty, is not elusive. But there is much it can do to expand trade and investment among its members. That this can be achieved in the wake of the realisation that the current form of neo-liberal globalisation serves to perpetuate the inequitable partnership between the poor and the rich in global competition adds to its own significance. The combined population of D8 members is over 800 million people and represents a formidable consumer market which should be exploited.

That a systematic institutionalised approach has yet to be taken to boost trade within the D8 market or the global market explains why it is still pertinent to remind itself at the next Dhaka summit of Dr Mahathir's earlier words - act more, achieve more or else, close shop. So far, it has shown it can mobilise itself to advance the course for an equitable global market economy - even if such steps begin within the group. It knows too well the danger of being on the sidelines in a neo-liberal world where the primacy of the market touches on the vertebral column of sovereignty and where the dollar is the currency of forced circulation. The stakes are too high for it not to capitalise on its political will and resources.

The D8's earlier success can lay the foundation of greater successes in other areas of mutual interest. Such hope, we dare say, is not misplaced. In bypassing the stage of antagonistic adolescence, it displays its maturity. It has resisted glossing over differences. It understands that building bridges of accommodation on the basis of shared perceptions and interests do not flow from mere sentimentalism. In Dhaka, true statesmanship from its members must prevail to beget more action, projects and results.

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