

Developing countries

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THE need for unity among developing countries could not be stressed enough at the Summit of the Group of 77 (G-77). Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad — the voice of the developing world — reminded the gathering that “while it is easy to meet, it is not easy to act together”.

The host of the first summit of 133 developing countries under the G-77 umbrella, Cuban President Fidel Castro Ruz, was no less blunt when he said: “We either unite and establish close cooperation, or we die!”

The G-77 — which since its founding in 1964 has expanded to 133 members accounting for four-fifths of the world population — is the third largest world co-

alition in the United Nations. The group has strength in numbers but that potential has not been tapped for its common good.

It is time that developing countries get their act together. They certainly are more in number than the developed countries. But unlike the developed world, developing countries of the South appear unable to work together. This is despite the fact that they have vested interests and common issues and concerns that require attention, that need to be tackled and resolved.

As Dr Mahathir pointed out in his speech at the summit, the rich are apparently more united. “Theirs is a small group of only seven countries. Al-

though they may have varying degrees of differences between them, they close ranks very rapidly if their dominance is challenged.”

Their approach is very simple. When new ideas crop up in the social, economic or political fields, the developed countries quickly come up with their own interpretations designed to benefit them.

“Thus we see them foisting on the world their moral values, their political systems and now economic globalisation. The South has no choice but to react to their interpretations. Reacting limits the choice and is less rewarding,” Dr Mahathir pointed out.

In reacting to issues, policies and trends, the developing world finds it-

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self trying to play “catch up”. They are also unable to fully enjoy the benefits of “independence”. They may have obtained political independence but continue to be subjected to economic colonialism in a different guise.

Because they are not united, developing countries are unable to face up to the might and force of the developed world. They lend themselves to the old practice of “divide and rule” in this modern world which is supposed to be more transparent, libera-

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lised and globalised.

Although members of the G-77 contribute significantly to the world population, they have been left out of most of the world’s critical decision-making bodies and processes. Their voice is not even heard in the UN and many of the international and multi-lateral lending organisations, much less represented.

The decision-making process of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) is dominated by the US. The “Washington Consensus” is

a powerful body that decides for the world. The views of the majority of the world’s population are not even sought or considered. The majority might be poor and developing-but they, too, have their “democratic rights” which have been drummed into them but are denied them when these matter most.

It is time developing countries put away their “narrow” self-interests and worked and acted collectively to ensure that their future is not decided for them.

Until they stand united to fight for their rights, they will continue to be stepped on. In today’s globalised and liberalised world, this domination will be economic in nature. They may find that their political in-

dependence becomes irrelevant as “economic growth and greater material wealth” is denied to their people.

In fact, as the recent crisis has shown, they may end up being poorer and their hard work reduced to naught overnight. The World Bank reported last week that the financial crisis of 1997-1998 dealt a severe blow to poverty eradication. Over 1.2 billion people were forced to get by on less than US\$1 a day in 1998. Some 57 per cent of the world’s population existed on just 6 per cent of world income.

It is evident that the gap between the rich and poor within and between countries is widening. Decreasing aid and growing income and technology

gaps between the North and South, which have been due in large part to economic globalisation and liberalisation, makes it urgent for developing countries to cooperate more closely, both with the industrialised countries and among themselves.

As there is increased and fierce competition in trade between the North and South, developing countries must work together to defend their economic interests and ensure their equitable participation in the international economic system.

If the South does not work to safeguard and promote its own interests, the developed North most certainly will not.