

20/11/2000

`Address poor representation'

ar Abdullah; Marina Emmanuel; Zuraimi Abdullah
PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has called for immediate attention to the issue of representation of developing economies in international fora.

"The larger issue of representation of developing economies in international fora is one of urgency that must be immediately addressed," he said in his keynote address at the opening of the Global 2000-LID at the Mahsuri International Exhibition Centre last night.

While making up three-fourths of the World Trade Organisation membership, he said the dependence of developing nations on the larger economies in terms of imports, exports, aid and security meant that their numbers could not be used to their advantage.

This obviously resulted in their inability to make their votes count, in a manner that served to influence the agenda and trade negotiations in their favour, he said.

"Economic limitation means fewer human and technical resources. It translates into an inability to cope with the 40 to 50 meetings held in Geneva each week.

"It means less preparation when entering into negotiations with counterparts from developed nations. It means settling for what is less than optimum outcomes in dispute settlements because of a level of legal expertise that is not up to par," said the Prime Minister.

In the face of such shortcomings, he said, developing countries must strengthen co-operation to ensure an effective system of global governance, where countries independent of size or economic strength, had their say.

"The network itself may serve as a surveillance system against the ills that may infiltrate our economies," he added.

The difficulties involved in putting together a new multilateral structure, said Dr Mahathir, could not be underestimated but it was evident that such efforts did work even though the process was long and hard.

"But pulling wool over the eyes is no longer feasible. It used to be that parties were willing to reach any kind of agreement, at the last hour, no matter how unsatisfactory, just so that `an agreement is reached'.

"Now countries are no longer content with doing that.

"The Seattle debacle is proof that developing countries are no longer willing to take the back seat.

"Hard lessons have been learnt from the Uruguay rounds. The merits and intentions of these so called `mediating mechanisms' of international multilateral agencies are seriously suspect.

"While the proponents of globalisation may argue that it is not a zero-sum game, the stakes are indeed higher in all facets of economic activities, be it trade, finances or economic negotiations," he added.

Dr Mahathir also spoke of how Smart partnership practices were instrumental in ensuring the social accessibility of knowledge.

The growth of e-commerce, he said, while projected to hit US\$7 trillion (RM26.6 trillion) by 2004, was a distant shadow to a vast majority of the world's population.

Despite a growth rate of 15,000 new Internet users a day and 220 million devices accessing the worldwide web with 200,000 added each day, it

remains that only five per cent of the world's population, mostly concentrated in the developed world, stand to gain from this boom.

"For starters, the top 20 per cent of the world's population account for 74 per cent of phone lines against the bottom 20 per cent having access to only 1.5 per cent.

"To say that this ratio must be rectified is a gross understatement," he said.

Dr Mahathir said while international co-operation was vital in bridging the widening digital divide, more importantly it allowed for representation of the views of the developing world in formulating international policies on the use and expansion of information technology.

He highlighted the absence of representatives from the developing world in the Internet Assigned Numbers Authority, as an example.

(END)