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Asem leaders show political will to deal with pressing problems

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AT the conclusion of the third Asia-Europe Meeting in Seoul on Saturday, leaders of the 25 member nations and the president of the European Commission had taken on the diverse problems of the world. And they showed the political will to take initiatives to deal with these problems.

The leaders' meeting or Asem III which began Oct 20 discussed issues ranging from globalisation, the deepening digital divide, trans-national corruption, money laundering, trafficking of women and children, HIV/AIDs, environment and forest conservation and management and sustainable development to the peace process in the Korean peninsula and the membership of Asem.

Certainly, having some of the most influential leaders of both hemispheres discussing and reaching a consensus on ways to tackle such daunting problems is positive and most encouraging.

The truth is, there was very little discussion in Asem simply because time was limited. There were just too many subjects to touch on. But perhaps, this is because much of the thrashing and hard bargaining had already been done at the senior officials' meeting which preceded the leaders' meeting.

Of course, this does not at all mean that Asem is ineffective or that it is just a place where leaders "talk shop". One is reminded by an Asem official that the meeting "is not stage-managed".

Be that as it may, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad did register a mild complaint that with all the leaders sitting, each leader is hardly given adequate time to deliberate.

"Each one is given only three minutes to talk about 10 different subjects. There was a feeling that time was not adequate and that there should be a limited number of subjects for discussion."

It is not wrong to assume that this is the consensus.

Perhaps, Malaysia could do with a little bit more time to discuss and express the country's views on globalisation and its dark side, a subject close to Dr Mahathir's heart.

Sure, Malaysia's firm stand on the need to ensure that globalisation does not marginalise poor countries whose national needs have got to be looked into is widely-known and consistent. Still, this is an issue of pressing concern for developing countries.

The forum, with leaders of some of the most powerful European countries, could do with a little bit more input from the Asian members.

A more effective forum of dialogue and co-operation, even an informal one, should be more focused. Deliberations should be narrowed to urgent and pressing issues.

Perhaps too, given more time the issue of Myanmar's membership in Asem could have been deliberated although the (general) issue of membership was discussed at Asem III.

But it was in general terms that it was agreed that membership is by consensus.

Generally too that as long as a country falls into a geographical footprint (of either Europe or Asia) and that it fulfils the objectives of Asem, its application would be accepted.

The European Union is objecting to Myanmar's membership into Asem based on the country's atrocious human rights record.

How farcical it is that Asem does not debate on the record of treatment

of immigrants by some members of the EU.

Yes, by all counts, the number of issues to be deliberated in Asem should be narrowed so that crucial and pressing issues can be resolved to bring meaning to transcontinental and inter-regional partnership, growth, co-operation and prosperity.

There are undoubtedly, successes of Asem from its inaugural summit in Bangkok in 1996 and in London 1998.

A series of ministerial and working-level meetings as well as a number of activities have been carried out in priority areas of trade and investment and in cultural co-operation since the Bangkok summit, which formed the groundwork for a new comprehensive Asia-Europe partnership for inter-continental growth.

Specifically, Asian countries hard hit by the 1997-98 financial crisis found the networking and reinforced partnership during and following the London summit to have been useful and supportive.

In the recently-concluded Seoul summit, one crucial document was adopted, one which gives much hope to regional security in Asia as well as Europe.

The Seoul Declaration for Peace in the Korean Peninsula supports the landmark June summit between the two Koreas towards rapprochement.

This is a major achievement especially for the host, South Korea whose President Kim Dae-Jung is the recipient of this year's Nobel Peace Prize.

"The first for this millennium," as a Korean official hastened to remind.

This, according to South Korean President Kim Dae-Jung, is the foundation for future expansion as a regional entity for co-operation by finalising the guidelines for new Asem membership.

Also, with Sweden, South Korea has proposed an Asem roundtable on globalisation to be held on an annual basis.

This is to enable member countries to identify appropriate measures to deal with the effects and various problems arising from globalisation through an indepth exchange of views and the sharing of experiences on a different topic each.

And for Malaysia, things are not too bad. The country in collaboration with the EU is preparing for the launching of the next multi-lateral WTO negotiations with the hosting of the WTO trade facilitation conference early next year.

Malaysia is of course hopeful that the conference will produce some really tangible and substantial results, given its strong stand on the current status of the negotiations.

Just as it is hopeful that next Asem to be held in Copenhagen in 2002 will see the deliberation of issues of priority and urgency that can bring long-term dividends to Europe and Asia.

As Dr Mahathir has put it - "there is a need to put substance in the relations between Europe and Asia."

Asem, young but not embryonic has prospects for that. And we will be as optimistic as British Prime Minister Tony Blair when he said in his opening address that "the very fact of this meeting is a cause for optimism".

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