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## Fighting biased Western media

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THE opening day of the Southern Africa International Dialogue on Sunday was marked by a resolute will from leaders of participating nations to fight the Western media's misrepresentation of the developing world.

At the end of a two-hour dialogue session participated by selected media partners, business and labour leaders, the heads of State and Government felt that establishing a news network and forging close co-operation among developing countries would help their cause in fighting the Western media's biased reporting.

They are also determined to ensure that the media and people in their countries uphold their values and traditions.

The leaders who assembled at a roundtable facilitated by Mozambican Prime Minister Dr Pascoal Mocumbi, examined the issue comprehensively, including asking themselves why their countries relied so much on Western media like the Cable News Network and Reuters for news about their own region.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told the session that Africa and Asia should take advantage of the "technology available at your doorsteps" to counter the Western media's biased and unfair representations of the region.

Telling the leaders of the Southern African nations and other dialogue partners that "I have stopped reading the Western media", Dr Mahathir suggested the creation of a hub or news network to enable Asia and Africa to exchange news and counter misreporting by the Western media.

According to a participant, Dr Mahathir remarked at the session that "if the Western media have frequently misreported about Malaysia, I suspect they have misreported on other countries as well".

Perhaps, the leader in the best position to relate his country's experience of having suffered at the hands of the Western media was the President of Zimbabwe, Robert Mugabe.

He strengthened the perception that the Western media had been unfairly biased to Asia and Africa.

The recent coverage of the election in Zimbabwe was cited as a good example of how the media in the West tried to set a preconceived idea on the outcome of the polls.

Even before the election, the dialogue participants were told, the Western media had portrayed the Zimbabwean election as unfair and said it was not free.

A leader argued that it would be costly for the Third World countries to install new technology like a satellite to broadcast news about the region, but Dr Mahathir told the leaders that the Internet was at their disposal and it was not costly.

The fact that many mainstream newspapers have gone online should facilitate the exchange of news between countries in Asia and Africa, he said.

One participant suggested that the media exchange stories about each other's region rather than depend on Western news agencies for reports on Asia and Africa.

"All we need to do is download a story, for example about an issue in South Africa, from a website owned by a South African newspaper and print it in our newspapers," said the participant.

A leader also suggested that a website which could be accessed by

nations in Asia and Africa be constructed.

Named by the participants as a "post office", the website should enable the users to "post and collect" reports of other countries on issues affecting the two regions.

A participant also suggested that an African news network be set up to link it with the Asian News Network which is now providing reports on Asia.

Despite a fruitful session, some participants were sceptical of the ideas materialising because of the attitude of some African countries and their leaders.

Emerging from the session, Makwaia Kahenga, editor-in-chief of Great Analysis of Tanzania, said some African leaders should be blamed for allowing their countries to become the victims of the Western media.

"Things will not change as long as our leaders continue to trust CNN rather than their own media," he said.

"Some African leaders are more interested in being interviewed by a white Western reporter rather than local reporters ... some of us even discard reports written by our own people," he added.

Kahenga praised Dr Mahathir for "educating African leaders".

"I could sense the reason why the Western media don't like Dr Mahathir," he said.

Before arriving at the Mozambican capital, Kahenga said he was contacted by Reuters in London.

He said they wanted to know what Dr Mahathir would be doing in Maputo.

"They pick on Dr Mahathir because they are worried he will educate the African leaders.

"Unfortunately, we have just one Mahathir Mohamad in the world," he said.

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