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Global village and an unequal partnership (see CORRECTION below)

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IS ANYONE paying attention to the suffering and woes of the poor in developing countries? Voices and focus in the developed world indicate that the answer is No!

Despite the concerns and pleas of the poor on the need to go slow on unbridled capitalism, check the hedge funds, capital flows, globalisation and liberalisation, the developed countries continue with their demands for market opening measures and to preach globalisation and liberalisation as a new religion that must not and should not be questioned.

Anyone who questions these "new religious movements" are labelled heretics and pariahs. Even the developing countries themselves are not united. Malaysia has repeatedly called on developing countries to unite to face the challenges of globalisation and liberalisation. While many would agree, at critical moments the divisions among them become clear.

Any wonder then that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Japan's former Vice Minister for International Affairs Eisuke Sakakibara are not hopeful of the outcome of the meeting of the developed countries, Group of Eight (G-8) in Okinawa, Japan.

Not only for the fact that the developed countries would pay scant attention to the plight of the poor, but developing countries themselves are not united and thus not a force to be reckoned with.

The most recent US trade deficit numbers indicate that the US is going to be very critical of Japan at the Okinawa meeting. There will be little time for views of developing countries. There is scarce chance that they will even be given a hearing. The G-8 is after all an exclusive club from which the majority of the world's population is excluded.

Developing countries have in various forums voiced their concerns, but these seem to have fallen on deaf ears. Among them, the Group of 15, Group of 77, Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), and Organisation of Islamic Countries (OIC) have voiced their concerns and sounded their views at various summits and meetings in recent months. But the appeals and concerns of the poor are ignored and it's like water off a duck's back.

What choice then do developing countries have? Unite and fight for their rights and those of their citizens. The developing countries collectively account for the majority in the world, yet individually they are economically weak. They have strength in numbers, if they choose to utilise it. Individually, they are not able to command the respect nor the attention of the developed world.

Developing and poor countries have been left out of the decision-making process at the international level, which is dominated by "governments of the developed countries and by international institutions that are mainly under their control and influence".

Even as they are excluded from the process, the decisions of the developed countries affect the poor. This was clearly demonstrated with the Plaza Accord when the Group of Seven (G-7) industrialised countries collectively agreed to strengthen the yen in keeping with US demands to reduce its deficit with Japan.

This decision saw the developing countries having to pay more for their yen-denominated loans so that the US could achieve its aim of reducing its trade deficit with Japan. Yet, the poor countries were not even consulted when a decision was taken at the plush New York Plaza Hotel.

Leaders in developing countries cannot be blamed if they decide to

ignore the decisions taken by developed countries. Especially if their (developing countries) views are not taken into account and the "decision is bad for us". This message was sent to the developed world by the Group of 77 (G-77) meeting in Havana, Cuba, and by the G-15 Heads of Government meeting in Cairo recently.

Malaysia has given the world notice that it will "fight tooth and nail" if the country's prosperity is threatened. Other countries need to do the same. Use their own internal strengths and fundamentals for the benefit of their people.

Malaysia has taken "unorthodox" measures and steps in dealing with the financial crisis of 1997 and in handling the process of globalisation and liberalisation to protect its citizens and economy from the adverse external influences.

"Globalisation is a savage process," according to John Micklethwait and Adiran Wooldridge. Martin Khor says a major feature of globalisation is the growing concentration and monopolisation of economic resources and power by transnational corporations and by global financial firms and funds.

The developed world and multilateral and international institutions continue to drum and shove "globalisation" down the throats of the poor. Developing countries see their independent policymaking capacity eroded, said Khor of Third World Network. Many developing countries have to adopt policies made by other entities, which may on balance be detrimental to the countries concerned.

In fact the most important feature of globalisation, according to Khor, is the "globalisation" of national policies and policymaking mechanisms. He adds that national policies which until recently were under the jurisdiction of states and people within a country have increasingly come under the influence of international agencies and processes or big private corporations and economic and financial players.

"This has led to the erosion of national sovereignty and narrowed the ability of governments and people to make choices from options in economic, social and cultural policies," Khor says.

This is a process that the developed world and the multilateral institutions continue to aggressively promote. Something that developing countries must be aware of. While on the one hand developed countries preach democracy and freedom of choice, good governance and transparency, yet the processes they are pushing and demanding developing countries adopt and pursue are not democratic and certainly lack transparency.

There seems to be a case of double standards. Do those who preach and demand that developing countries pursue these policies really know what the poor go through? In their book entitled, *A Future Perfect*, Micklethwait and Wooldridge sum up the situation when they wrote that "Very few of the consultants who celebrate the global village seem to have flown economy class over long distances."

Thus it is time those in the "economy class" unite and demand their rights and an equal say in policies and decisions that affect them before it is too late.