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Learning from Malaysian experience

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THE AFRICAN continent makes headlines for its strife, coups, lack of progress and poor development. It is also associated with corruption, dictators, bad governance, lack of democracy and cronyism.

Then again there are health and social ills that take a toll of human life, AIDS and malaria among them.

The continent also has its share of natural disasters. The massive floods in February in Mozambique and a number of neighbouring states, devastated homes and property causing immeasurable hardships and suffering.

But there is more to Africa than the headlines suggest. The continent is "an untamed paradise" and a place where the wild beasts can still roam free. It is rich in minerals, among them gold, diamonds and titanium but sadly it remains one of the poorest regions in the world.

The tremendous African economic potential remains untapped. Thus leaders of Southern Africa met in Maputo, Mozambique, with a view to unlock the potential for the collective good of their people and to seek ways to tap and develop the vast economic potential of the "dark continent".

Southern African leaders and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who met under specially constructed marquees over three days on the shores of the Indian Ocean demonstrated that obstacles can be overcome in the spirit of Smart Partnerships.

This is the fourth Southern Africa International Dialogue (SAID). The first was held in Kasane, Botswana in 1997, followed by Swakopmand, Namibia in 1998 and Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe last year.

Even though Mozambique was dealt a severe blow to life and property by the worst floods in February, the successful hosting of the SAID showed the determination of its leaders to overcome adversity.

With the same resolve and determination African leaders can overcome the obstacles to be self reliant and forge ahead.

SAID, an offshoot of the Langkawi International Dialogue (LID), has also helped foster closer economic relations among Southern African leaders and identify ways of moving forward.

It offers leaders - political, business, ladies, labour and media - an opportunity to consider economic and social issues of importance to the region and areas and avenues of co-operation. The informal format of the dialogue enables them to discuss issues and problems as equals.

Dr Mahathir said with a better understanding of the Smart Partnership it encouraged greater regional co-operation among leaders who are now more interested in economic development and the welfare of their people and less focused on politics.

Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe agreed with Dr Mahathir when he reportedly said that SAID is the only regional grouping where he is able to discuss economic issues and not be bogged down by politics.

The Smart Partnership concept has fostered closer relations and greater willingness to co-operate among African leaders. There is no alternative but for the African leaders to work together and co-operate. America is doing it and Europe is doing it. Why not Africa?

Dr Mahathir noted that the African leaders who now have a better understanding and appreciation of Smart Partnership are moving beyond "talking" and beginning to co-operate in the implementation of several projects in Southern Africa.

Some of the joint projects have achieved "notable successes" while

others are at various stages of implementation. These include cross-border tourism ventures, joint development corridors, strengthening of business and economic links and consolidation of national smart partnership hubs.

Southern Africa with its safaries, game parks and wildlife has tremendous tourism potential but unfortunately it lacks facilities such as accommodation, transportation and communications and attracts only one per cent of world tourism.

The joint and "smart" development of tourism facilities and joint promotion was the subject of intense discussions by participants of SAID in Victoria Falls last year.

Mugabe reported progress on some of the initiatives including the Okavango-Upper Zambezi International Tourism Project between Bostwana, Namibia, Zambia and Zimbabwe and the Trans Frontier Park Initiative covering the Gonarezhou Park in Zimbabwe, Kruger Park in South Africa and Gaza Park in Mozambique.

However he also expressed concern that most of the initiatives "are getting stuck in bureaucracy among officials of the various countries concerned". This causes unnecessary delays and increased cost build-up.

Problems in immigration and customs continue to persist and "barriers of suspicion between private sector, media and government continue" Mugabe said adding that "business linkage partnership did not make any progress".

In efforts to seek ways to overcome these shortcomings and obstacles direct face to face meetings or "Smart Partners Business Links" networking sessions were organised.

Some ideas were discussed including a directory of businesses, necessary information on investment condition and requirements and a web site providing investment and economic information on member countries to assist prospective investors.

The Commonwealth Partnership for Technology Management (CPTM) in London, the joint organiser of SAID has been given the task to provide the required information.

Hot on the heels of the fourth SAID in Maputo leaders of South Africa and Mozambique met to consider joint promotion of tourism and development of various infrastructure.

Both President Thabo Mbeki of South Africa and Joaquim Alberto Chissano of Mozambique who met on Aug 25 with several of their senior ministers in attendance, agreed on the need for closer co-operation in the spirit of the Smart Partnership.

Many of the areas discussed by Chissano and Mbeki were in fact discussed during SAID in Maputo. The first leg of the two part Global 2000, focused on "Global Trends and Emerging Economies" and took off from where discussions left off last year and considered new and emerging issues.

Issues relating to globalisation and liberalisation and how they impact and affect developing countries were considered. The leaders examined the implications of the new economy on emerging economies and how Smart Partnership approach can make a difference.

African leaders are keen to learn from Malaysia's experience and the dialogues offered them the opportunity to hear directly from Malaysians. In addition to the Prime Minister and Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, businessmen, entrepreneurs and representatives of the Malaysian media were on hand to relate the Malaysian experience and the remedies and policies adopted to overcome the recent financial crisis.

Malaysia's experience and policies, which initially were condemned but now being praised and accepted by even the international community, are seen as being more relevant to developing countries than those of the developed nations.

In fact the discussions on globalisation, liberalisation, Information

Technology (IT), emerging global trends and the role of the media in fostering better appreciation and understanding of developing countries' concerns will be continued in Langkawi in November.

The Langkawi International Dialogue (LID) will consider how Smart Partnerships can help developing countries enhance collective action and safeguard their interests and counter negative effects of globalisation and other forces.

Dr Mahathir has warned that "the forces of globalisation" will affect everyone including the man in the street as much as the "heads of government and captains of industries".

The "ideology" and "concept" merits serious thinking and "we need to strategise our responses". These issues will undoubtedly be examined when the leaders meet in Langkawi.

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