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Message for rich nations: Don't just hear, listen

Hardev Kaur in Bangkok

THE 10th UN Conference on Trade and Development opened amid calls by developing countries for greater attention to their needs and circumstances.

The message being sent to the developed world here is loud and clear. But the voices of the poor and developing countries must not only be heard but also listened to.

The Bangkok Post in an editorial says: "If the community of nations is to move forward, there must be balance and recognition of the deep concerns of developing countries. Their concerns must be addressed."

The developing countries may not be "advanced" or slick in their presentations and may not be articulate in their speeches but this does not mean they do not have opinions. They have experience and knowledge that can enrich the "global knowledge bank".

The cookie-cutter policies and one-size-fits-all remedies laid out by the developed world and many of the multilateral organisations have failed.

"The developed countries must avoid a sterile triumphalism or a one-medicine-cures-all prescription. Globalisation is undoubtedly a Western concept and bears a strong imprint of American political and economic power," says Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chock Tong.

Opposition to such policies, especially those of the IMF, in some Asian countries including Thailand, is being clearly demonstrated in Bangkok. IMF managing director Michel Camdessus was given a "sweet farewell" with a cream pie in his face by a member of the Patissiers Sans Frontieres. (Camdessus steps down from his IMF post tomorrow after heading it for 13 years).

The hardships caused by the recent Asian financial crisis - unemployment, lower wages, lack of medical facilities - and exacerbated by IMF policies has brought many in the Thai capital to the streets.

However, unlike in Seattle, the demonstrations in Bangkok are "peaceful". There are no loud speakers but the message is getting across with banners saying "WTO, IMF, ADB, Go To Hell".

Equally loud messages are being delivered by developing countries in the halls of the Queen Sirikit National Convention Centre as in numerous other forums around the world.

But Unctad is not a negotiating forum. It has never been. As a legitimate UN organisation, it can offer a platform for its members - developing and developed - an equal opportunity to express their views. And the poorer members are no longer afraid to do so. Their frustrations, concerns and worries are being manifested in many ways. It is time the developed countries read the signs and listened to the voices of concern.

Differences on labour and environment issues, coupled with the insistence of developed nations on continuing with their "protectionist policies" against the imports of developing countries, has widened the rift between the two camps.

UN secretary general Kofi Annan strongly denounced protectionism by the rich countries when he said: "Development is held back by the barriers which industrialised countries still put in the way of exports from developing ones."

The playing field in the technological-advanced and increasingly-globalised world is far from level. In fact, it is tilting in favour of

the rich countries.

While "North-South" discussions under Unctad's auspices are not being pursued as vigorously as before, the issues are no less important today as in the 1960s and '70s.

The gap between the rich and poor is widening. Today there are many developments over which developing countries have little or no control. Globalisation, liberalisation, borderless flows of capital and the advent of the "new economy" have complicated the development equation even more.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad pointed out that income inequality is growing. The major developed countries have GDP per capita of over US\$25,000 while the poorest have as little as US\$100.

Unctad secretary general Rubens Ricupero pointed out that all indicators show continued marginalisation of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and their inability to take advantage of the rules-based multilateral trading system.

The developed countries insist that developing countries abide by the rules, yet they violate the very same rules when it suits them.

There is no greater challenge for the world community than to ensure that the poor are not marginalised by the new economic forces.

It has become clear, even as the new millennium dawns, that while the 1980s were dubbed the 'lost decade' for developing countries, in general, and the LDCs, in particular, the 1990s have been, for the LDCs, the decade of inequality, poverty and social exclusion.

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