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Unity still is strength

IT is said that fortune favours the brave. That might be true in life, in war and in enterprise. But in the mercenary world of the markets, international markets, the favoured are the mighty. They were the colonists in history. They are now neo-colonists in the vanguard of globalisation, a process of unfettered free flow of trade and services across the globe. Globalisation, inevitable as it is in the irrevocable process and progression of international trade, is a term coined by the economists in advanced economies. And they make and change the rules willy nilly, rendering the process unfair and inequitable to their partners in trade.

That was manifest in the past. During the Uruguay Round of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, the US and Japan secured special terms for their textiles and agricultural products. As global trade increasingly endangered their supremacy in these sectors, they put up hurdles in the form of tariff and no-tariff barriers such as quotas and patronising sanctions on exporting countries. The double standards will continue to persist. So warned Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the Smart Partnership Dialogue in Pulau Langkawi on Sunday.

The question then would be: what should be done to level the playing field of globalisation? One solution as Dr Mahathir suggested is to address the issue of poor representation of developing countries in international fora.

They make up the numbers; but their voice is feeble. In the World Trade Organisation developing and emerging economies comprise three-fourth of the membership. But the rich and powerful dictate the issues on the agenda of each and every meeting and each and every trade negotiation.

The dependence of developing nations on the larger economies for export, aid and security does not necessarily mean the weak have to be meek and speak softly in international meetings. If they continue with this attitude they would not make their numbers count in votes; they would not be able to influence the agenda and trade negotiations in their favour. They should not be preoccupied over their economic limitations, their fewer human and technical resources. For their strength and clout is inherent in their numbers.

If they enjoin themselves into a chorus, their voice would be loud and clear. And they can exert their will. As the Prime Minister pointed out, the Seattle collapse of the WTO talks is proof that developing nations are no longer willing to take a back seat.

And so the gist and grist of Dr Mahathir's speech at the LID was the exhortation to developing economies to unite and brace themselves against the potentially domineering forces of globalisation. The threat of economic domination by the rich and mighty countries is real. Globalisation by definition favours them. But the forces of the process can be harnessed to work in favour of the developing economies.

If that is they unite, speak as one and institute rules to enable them to catch up in time at their own pace, and not in the time-frame dictated by major economic countries.

They should heed one more lesson. This is from Greek mythology where the sons of gods and goddesses rose up to surmount the will and might of their parents to rule the mythical world. They were called the Titans. Developing nations can be modern-day Titans if they form smart

partnerships among themselves.

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