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Views from the South

IT'S been long in coming, but the Group of 77's (G-77) resolve to speak with one voice at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) provides developing countries with a good start in the new millennium. The South has been fragmented for too long and in various international platforms they have played the role of the silent majority to the letter. It has not done them any good and most of them know it; hence, attempts at various South groupings to find and speak with one voice, especially during the 1980s when the calls for North-South dialogues were the most insistent. These attempts have brought some progress in bringing the South closer together but they have never been totally successful in getting the North to listen.

Which is why the new resolve by the developing countries to speak with one voice is a great victory of political will. The timing, too, could not have been more crucial. Some industrialised countries have been promoting a new trade round at the WTO to push through the globalisation and liberalisation agenda. If not for the riots and the resulting fiasco in Seattle last year, the issue would have been forced down everyone's throat.

Was there any care if developing countries were ready or not for the new round of multilateral negotiations? Did the Group of Seven (G-7) industrialised countries take down notes when developing countries expressed reservations about the objectives of globalisation and were they going to act on these concerns before they pursue the new round of trade talks?

Very unlikely. The North-South divide has been there for years and it seems that it has always been the developing countries which wanted to have a serious chat with the industrialised countries, not the other way round. There have been contacts between North and South but at regional levels or when a developing country register its feelings with an industrialised country on a bilateral basis. The Group of Fifteen, which was formed in the late 1980s to also try and get the North-South dialogues resumed ended up being a talk shop of the South. At the WTO or the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum, sessions were almost always led and dominated by the industrialised countries. The developing nations were expected to be good followers.

An unlikely hero, but the G-77 can start changing the way things have been with the North-South relationship following the Havana presidential summit which ended over the weekend. Attended by some very influential and forceful leaders of the South, including Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and South Africa President Thabo Mbeki, this grouping which was born almost four decades ago has been given a new lease of life - and the huge task of achieving what other South groupings has not been able to do. The G-77 will talk with one voice representing developing countries, it will present its views to the G-7, and developing countries will not agree to anything the G-7 decides if it is decided without prior consultations with the G-77. That's the brief anyway. And the G-77 must ensure that it happens the way the Cuban summit has agreed to.

It will not be easy but there is no other way. To find a consensus among the members of the G-77 will prove to be the first and most difficult task for the G-77 chairman and Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo. To make the G-7 listen to group's voice will also prove very tough. But the

developing countries must be made to realise that they don't stand a chance against their industrialised counterparts unless they combine their resources and speak with one voice. They cannot remain the silent majority they have always been if they wish to create a fairer playing field and if they want their interests to be protected and promoted. They have a responsibility to help their counterparts in the North shape the policies and practices for the global community. The industrialised countries have the easier task of listening to these views and including them in all future so-called global agenda.

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