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NAM-ACCOLADES

ACCOLADES CONTINUE FOR M'SIA FOR HOSTING NAM SUMMIT

By: Yong Soo Heong

KUALA LUMPUR, March 10 (Bernama) -- The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit has come and gone but the accolades for Malaysia, the current chairman of NAM, continue to pour in.

A recent article by Antara news agency's Theo Yusuf is a case in point when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was hailed as "the voice of the South."

The writer also quoted the rector of the Makassar Islamic University, Prof Dr Zainuddin Taha, as saying that Malaysia's achievements should be a mirror for other NAM member countries to emulate.

After the sharp setback during the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis, Malaysia's economic fortunes turned for the better.

Last year, for instance, saw Malaysia registering a robust growth of 4.2 percent after recording a growth of just 0.4 percent in 2001, a year which was afflicted by the slow global economy and the after-effects of Sept 11. Malaysia's holding of foreign reserves at the end of January 2003 showed a healthy US\$33.5 billion.

The director of Indonesia's Centre for Strategic and International Studies, Pande Raja Silalahi and the dean of economics at Trisakti University, Bob Widayahartono, were also quoted in the same Antara article as they paid tribute to Mahathir's courage for being vocal against the dictates of the International Monetary Fund and for pulling Malaysia out of the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis in a relatively fast manner.

For NAM, Dr Mahathir quickly got down to business when he set the tone right when opening the NAM Business Forum. He emphatically called for a clear message to be sent to the movement's detractors that "NAM is still alive and intends to play a major role in the post-Cold War era."

"NAM is a major forum for consultations and co-ordination of positions on crucial political and economic issues among the developing countries," he had said.

And in this, Dr Mahathir had stressed the need for the 116-member movement to speak with one voice, especially in addressing economic issues which tended to favour developed nations at present.

"We must stay together and act together," he said.

At the same time, Dr Mahathir's "prosper thy neighbour" concept has caught on. The latest "convert" on this is Timor Leste's president, Xanana Gusmao, who had asked Malaysian investors to explore business opportunities in manufacturing, tourism, fisheries and agriculture in his country. Timor Leste is also asking Malaysia for help in formulating its economic policies.

This brings to mind what Dr Mahathir had said at the NAM Business Forum that there is a lot of business to be done in the South.

"Why else should the countries of the North fight each other in order to get the business of the countries of the South?" he asked.

It means that there are business opportunities in the South and it also means that companies in the South can also avail themselves of these opportunities and keep more of the wealth within the South, he said.

Dr Mahathir also showed that he meant business when he proposed the establishment of the NAM Business Council, a platform where the business community of the South can learn to work together, to study and discuss, and devise ways to overcoming their problems.

At the end of the successful NAM summit, its "wet blankets" were

somewhat silenced. And Acting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi recently said despite the presence of detractors, Malaysia was able to show the way that NAM was alive and relevant.

He said certain foreign media also condemned Malaysia during the regional financial crisis but their actions had not prevented the country from initiating measures to deal with the situation.

"They've criticised Malaysia and the prime minister but we continued to forge ahead. We knew what we were doing and we succeeded," he said.

During the crisis, Abdullah said Malaysia did not subscribe to the established strategy by accepting the remedy offered by the IMF and resorted to measures which were described as most unorthodox.

"We've proven finally that we're doing right. We didn't suffer high social costs to achieve economic recovery," he said. -- BERNAMA

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