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Steering LID to firmer ground

By Saiful Azhar Abdullah

COULD it be the last Langkawi International Dialogue? Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi quashed all doubts last week. SAIFUL AZHAR ABDULLAH writes on how the Prime Minister made his mark at the Smart Partnership dialogue.

SIR Ketumile Masire, the former President of Botswana, sitting next to Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in a conference room at Pelangi Beach Resort on the eve of the Langkawi International Dialogue, made this remark: "We need Malaysia more than they need us."

Those who had attended previous dialogues or had become advocates of the Smart Partnership dialogue knew what he meant.

Masire was among the Heads of State and Government from Southern Africa, Asia and the Caribbean who converged on Langkawi in 1995, curious to find out what the Smart Partnership movement was all about.

Since then, Masire has attended most of the dialogues, whether in Langkawi, southern Africa or the Caribbean.

And on Saturday, he was again with the Prime Minister to convey to the media what they had achieved after three days of "dialoguing" and networking.

What started out as just a simple dialogue session in 1995 in Langkawi has become a much awaited event among the "Smart Partners" in Africa.

When the dialogue was held in Ezulwini, Swaziland, last year, known as the Southern Africa International Dialogue whenever it's held in the region, it emerged as the biggest event ever held by the kingdom.

So excited were the Swazis that they came in droves to pledge chicken, cattle, dinners and lunches to demonstrate their support and expectations of the Smart Partnership dialogue.

A 10-year-old boy, Phephisa Nxumla, donated five chickens to help his monarch, King Mswati III, to hold the dialogue.

"The dialogue does not necessarily provide food on the table but it provides a tool to a poor country like us to prosper for the betterment of the people," exhorted Swaziland's Economic Planning and Development Minister Prince Guduza.

Who benefits most from the dialogue? It was them. And who is their role model? It's Malaysia.

When Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad stepped down last year, some quarters cast doubt on whether Abdullah would want it to continue.

In the first place, there shouldn't be any doubt. "It's a platform for the Prime Minister to reach out to the developing world," said a senior official.

The loud cheers and accolades for Abdullah, performing his duties as the host patron for the first time, at the just concluded Langkawi International Dialogue, were understandable.

They wanted to hear from him personally, and the Prime Minister gave his word in the presence of the Heads of State and Government and former Presidents and Prime Ministers, including his predecessor, Dr Mahathir, who spearheaded the Smart Partnership movement, that "I am committed to this dialogue".

"At the last Smart Partnership dialogue, I was asked what's going to happen to the Langkawi International Dialogue after Dr Mahathir retires and after I take over.

"At that point of time, I gave my promise that the Langkawi dialogue would continue and today it has become a reality."

The continuity demonstrated by Dr Mahathir and Abdullah was important for this movement, said Datuk Dr Mihaela Smith, chief executive of the Commonwealth Partnership for Technology Management, one of the organisers of the event.

In fact, the smooth transition of power from Dr Mahathir to Abdullah, said Mihaela, had been seen as among the many success stories that could be adopted by other developing nations in the Smart Partnership movement.

Now that Abdullah has given his commitment, the dialogue has been given a much stronger footing.

Now it's Abdullah turn to show the way to the developing nations. The Smart Partners from southern Africa have started to look up to him for ideas on how to manage their countries better.

At last week's Langkawi Dialogue, they heard Malaysia's other experiences. They picked Abdullah's thoughts on the challenges to development. They listened to how Malaysia succeeded in eradicating the human divide; how Malaysia overcame poverty, and successfully brought down the poverty rate from 52 per cent in 1970 to 15 per cent in 1990.

They were briefed on Malaysia's bold social engineering approach. And Abdullah expounded on why a Government should rule with integrity and transparency.

They all concurred with the Prime Minister that the problems of corruption and conflict had taken a toll on the development of their countries.

Let's give credit where it's due. And Abdullah deserved that credit, for making this year's dialogue a success.

Despite that success, there were minor grievances that need to be addressed by the organisers before Malaysia hosts the next Langkawi International Dialogue in 2006.

One of them was the dwindling participation of Malaysia's prominent corporate executives.

Unlike the 1995 and 1996 dialogues, fewer Malaysian captains of industry made their presence felt in the dialogue.

"Perhaps some of our corporate people feel that they are so well off today that they no longer need to attend such a dialogue," said an official.

But they have become role models to the businesses in the developing nations. Their experiences are useful to other businessmen and our young entrepreneurs.

Therefore, their presence will be appreciated by their fellow businessmen. These young businessmen are hungry for their guidance.

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