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Beef up role, says Mbeki

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THE Non-Aligned Movement remains highly relevant and must continue to strengthen its role, said South African President Thabo Mbeki, the current NAM chairman.

As he prepares to hand over the chair to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the upcoming Kuala Lumpur summit, Mbeki stressed the growing importance of NAM in an increasingly globalised world.

He said the developing world was grappling with the issues of globalisation and its impact on developing countries.

"It's obvious that there needs to be an intervention of NAM with regard to that process," he said in an interview with the NST in Cape Town.

"Nobody can stop globalisation, but it is important that the necessary interventions are made so that the process does not disadvantage the countries of the NAM, and developing countries in general."

While NAM must be the voice of the developing world, Mbeki said it should also be a strong supporter of other multilateral organisations, the most important of which is the United Nations.

He said NAM must insist that the UN plays an important role in world affairs while it pushes hard for democratisation of the UN itself, in particular of the Security Council.

"It's important for NAM to insist that countries should not, because they are strong and powerful, act unilaterally in any way they like. It can't be correct," he said.

He added that the issue of Iraq, for instance, must be dealt with at the UN because of its huge implications.

Mbeki said NAM recently took the initiative to approach the Security Council to enable it to participate in the discussions on Iraq, and this paved the way for non-NAM countries to join in as well.

"It's clear that the NAM continues to have an important role."

He welcomed Malaysia taking over the chairmanship of the movement, as Dr Mahathir would be able to provide the leadership needed at this time.

Mbeki was, however, non-committal on the issue of establishing a permanent secretariat for NAM, as he felt that the co-ordinating bureau in New York, has worked.

"It worked as a permanent standing committee of the NAM to be able to take up NAM issues. The setting up of a secretariat is a matter that has been discussed quite extensively.

"I think that we need to give members more time to reflect on this, because I don't think you necessarily want to create institutions that are not going to add very much value."

Mbeki will be attending the summit, and is also a scheduled speaker at the NAM Business Forum. He became president of South Africa in 1999, succeeding Nelson Mandela.