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NAM rises to changing role

Abdullah Ahmad

NINETEEN FIFTY-FIVE was a year I look back on with much pleasure despite failing an important examination. I was not in the least affected by the failure because that year I participated in the first general election in Malaya: as a student supporter of Umno and an election counting agent, which was to introduce me eventually into journalism and politics (as political secretary to Tun Razak).

My participation in politics while still in my teens was too fervent, no; too involved, yes. It ruined my studies. But I have no regrets.

I was ecstatic when the first Afro-Asian conference was held in Bandung. I had hoped that with it, the ordeal of the 20th century - the bloodiest, most exploitative and turbulent period in history - was going to be buried and a new order replacing imperialism would be born. I was an angry young man (only 18), in retrospect, naive.

Now let's talk sense. Let's talk the truth. We are far from succeeding in halting war, burying tyranny, injustice, inequality and perfidy. The assaults upon human dignity and the weak continue uninhibited. I hope the Non-Aligned Movement conference here in Kuala Lumpur will address some of the pressing issues of the present. However, let us continue to fight so that there is a tiny ripple of hope for us in the Third World.

Almost by definition, all organisations that aspire to anything as ambitious as making the world a better place fall short of their ideals.

From the United Nations down to the most humble NGO, people with the very best intentions can lose heart when faced with the enormity of their tasks. That doesn't mean that their efforts will be useless or that they might as well give up.

And so it is with NAM. I regret having to assert the continued relevance of the 114-member congregation of mostly small nations at the outset of its 13th Summit, which begins tomorrow.

Unfortunately, and sometimes misleadingly, relevance is tied up with overt performance, and NAM hasn't been flying as high as its wings can carry it. But although global politics has changed, it is as relevant today as it was at its founding, which was initiated at the 1955 Bandung Conference.

The significance of that conference - a bold expression of the struggle of newly independent nations to get on their feet after centuries of imperialism - is lost on many of us today.

It was attended by the hall of fame of what was later to be called the "Third World": Jawarhalal Nehru, Chou En-Lai, Kwame Nkrumah, Gamal Abdel Nasser, Ho Chi Minh, U Nu and Sukarno, the host, whose daughter, President Megawati Sukarnoputri, though so unlike her famous father, is the only direct link with the past to be present in Kuala Lumpur.

Egypt has produced no one with the stature of Nasser, nor has Vietnam or Myanmar come up with leaders comparable to their independence fathers. After Nkrumah, Black Africa has had Nelson Mandela and now Thabo Mbeki. In Asia, only Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been a consistent champion of the Third World.

Richard Wright, whose chronicle, *The Colour Curtain*, of the gathering of leaders of the 29 Asian and African countries remains as moving today as it was when it was first published 46 years ago, said this:

"The despised, the insulted, the hurt, the dispossessed, in short, the underdogs of the human race were meeting. Here were class and racial and

religious consciousness on a global scale. Who had thought of organising such a meeting? And what had these nations in common? Nothing, it seemed to me, but what their past relationship to the Western world had made them feel."

And what the present relationship with the West continues to make them feel, I should add. The conference's stalwarts were in the first blush of independence and found themselves up against the pincers of the Cold War, but they were right in making a united stand against the meddling of external powers. If they sound a little naive today, it is only because they underestimated the tireless persistence of that meddling and bullying which continues to this day.

The strategy of the Afro-Asian states at Bandung was to help each other and strengthen their independence (pertinent even now) from Western imperialism while keeping out of the orbit of the Soviet Union.

This strategic bloc, which sought to steer clear of the East-West confrontation, was the beginning of what came to be known as "non-alignment".

At a preparatory meeting in Cairo, the principal aims and objectives of a policy of non-alignment were fleshed out and adopted as criteria for membership as well as for the invitations to the First Summit Conference, which took place in Belgrade in September 1961.

The criteria revolved on "an independent policy based on the co-existence of states with different political and social systems", which included consistent support for the freedom of all incipient nations in relation to the major powers.

How many of the 114-member nations can honestly own up to this ideal? One stipulation was that an intending member must not be party to a military alliance or defence pact "concluded in the context of Great Power conflicts".

Though Malaysia was not a member of the Southeast Asia Treaty Organisation (Seato) - established under Western auspices after the French withdrawal from Indochina to oppose further communist gains in the region - Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra decided not to join NAM because, as he said to me years later "it smacks too much of left-wing politics for my liking". Neutrality or non-alignment became official policy when Tun Razak became prime minister in 1970.

To its (mostly Western) critics, NAM was merely a tactic for small countries to play off one great power against the other. They thought that a movement sustained by chest-beating rhetoric could not last, particularly with the chequered track records of many of its members. But the principle of neutrality and the aims and purposes of non-alignment easily survived the ending of the Cold War.

For a simple, compelling, reason: The conditions prevailing in the late Fifties, which resulted in the powerlessness of sovereign nations to determine their own fates and safeguard the future of their peoples, apply equally today.

Big, hegemonic nations dominate the weak, which thereby have no real choice but to band together in a desperately unequal world, whether it is bipolar as in the Cold War or unipolar as it is today.

That banding together is even more imperative in the era of Westernised globalisation.

In the competition for spheres of influence during the Cold War, small countries had some leverage in the extraction of concessions from either side. Today, with a single superpower, the United States, that leverage has gone. Small countries would be pushed even further into the periphery unless they were somehow able to find strength in numbers.

That is why the principles of NAM adopted at the Cairo preparatory

meeting were so readily reaffirmed at the Eleventh Summit in Cartagena in 1995. The ending of the Cold War had required some rethinking. Although the basics remained as valid as ever, its focus had to change, from politics to economics. Cartagena marked the point at which the organisation began to get down to some real work.

It took some time because inertia is inherent in all multilateral organisations that must first obtain and then mobilise agreement among a disparate membership. Consensus is especially central to NAM, a group of developing countries formed to speak in unison. Since it is a membership of equals against external domination, it must also be just as scrupulous about internal domination.

So scrupulous, in fact, that the founders of NAM and their successors avoided such formal structures as a constitution and secretariat. They thought that a multi-lateral transnational organisation made up of states with differing ideologies and purposes could never create a rational administrative structure to implement its policies that all could accept.

NAM therefore has a unique administrative style. It is "non-hierarchical, rotational and inclusive, providing all member states, regardless of size and importance, with an opportunity to participate in global decision-making and world politics".

That participation is largely done through the permanent representatives of member nations at the UN in New York under the NAM chair, which will be Malaysia's after the hosting of the summit. The chair country articulates the position of the membership on the world stage and devotes a section of its Foreign Ministry to this end.

Malaysia, a small country speaking with a loud voice, has been bequeathed a large role to play and must not take its responsibilities lightly.

President Mbeki of South Africa, the outgoing chairman, is glad that Dr Mahathir has taken over from him because "he will provide strong leadership needed at this juncture (in the international environment and NAM's history)".