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Collapsing on its clay feet...

Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad

MAY I as Prime Minister of Malaysia and chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement, offer my sincere congratulations to you on your election (Julian Hunte of Saint Lucia) as president of the 58th session of the General Assembly. I am confident that given your wisdom, experience and diplomatic skill, you will be able to steer the proceedings of this Assembly to a successful conclusion.

I wish to assure you of the fullest co-operation of the Malaysian delegation. I strongly believe that the members of the Non-Aligned Movement would similarly render all their support and co-operation to you.

Allow me also to pay tribute to your predecessor, His Excellency Mr Jan Kavan, for his dedication and the effective manner in which he had conducted the work of the 57th Session of the General Assembly.

I also commend the Secretary-General for his efforts and perseverance and I salute the men and women who have dedicated and given their lives in the service of the United Nations.

This Assembly has been conceived as a forum for the nations of the world, big and small, to air their views and grievances freely as the stakeholders in the governance of the international community. It is unfortunately subservient to the United Nations Security Council, which in turn is subservient to any single one of the five victors of a war fought more than half a century ago. It is hardly a democratic forum but it is all that the great civilisation of the late 20th and early 21st centuries has; a civilisation that is supposed to uphold freedom.

Still we, the small nations have much to be grateful for. From being the colonies of the Europeans we are now independent, and we are granted membership of the United Nations with the right to speak, albeit with proper restraint and decorum at this august assembly. And as independent nations we believe we have a right to manage our internal affairs ourselves without foreign interference.

We admit that there are abuses in the management of our countries by some of our governments. But our detractors should remember that they had also abused their governments' power when they seized land belonging to the indigenous people and exterminated them, claiming that it was their "Manifest Destiny", the "White Man's Burden", to bring civilisation by setting up their own countries in these lands and confining the indigenous people to barren reserves, with no role in the government of the new nations.

What they had done to the indigenous people is not out of character for in their own countries they had carried out pogroms against the Jews, inquisitions and mock trials, torture and killing by burning at the stakes.

We all carry the baggage of history. But we would be willing to leave them behind if it is not for the fact that history has a nasty habit of repeating itself. Today, we are seeing the resurgence of European imperialism. At first we thought the colonisation would be virtual.

Merely by economic strangulation and financial emasculation, the newly independent countries could be brought to their knees, begging to be recolonised in other forms. But today we are actually faced by the old physical occupation by foreign forces. Puppet regimes are installed dancing as puppets do.

And this august institution, the United Nations, in which we had pinned

so much hope, despite the safeguards supposed to be provided by the Permanent Five, this Organisation is today collapsing on its clay feet, helpless to protect the weak and the poor. This United Nations can just be ignored, pushed aside, gesticulating feebly as it struggles to be relevant.

Its organs have been cut out, dissected and reshaped so they may perform the way the puppet masters want. The World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organisation have now been turned into instruments of hegemony, to impoverish the poor, to enrich the rich. It is not surprising that today the disparities between rich and poor are far greater.

With an impotent United Nations and its agencies turned into national organs of the powerful, the small nations are now naked and hapless. Even if are totally innocent, there is nothing to prevent trumped up charges to be made against us.

We feel a great need for the integrity and credibility of the UN to be restored. Fortunately, the breach of international norms has been by countries which are reputedly tolerant of free speech and the rights of others.

When criticisms are forbidden then the abuses will increase until they become intolerable and revolt takes place with all the destruction that accompanies it. That was what happened with Saddam Hussein on a national scale. That also can happen on an international scale. Free speech provides the safety valve, the absence of which must lead to an explosion eventually.

Since the Asian financial crisis in 1997, Malaysia has not been able to recover fully. This crisis has been followed by the collapse of the dot.com companies, the massive cheating by the huge multinational corporations of the rich.

Then came the Sept 11 attack by terrorists, which precipitated an unprecedented tightening up of security worldwide, the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq.

The world now lives in fear - the rich from terror attacks and the others from being made targets of suspicions and pre-emptive aggression.

Then came the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome, which almost bankrupted many airlines, and the tour and travel business. SARS disappeared almost as quickly as it appeared. But there is no guarantee that it, or similar new infectious diseases, will not come back.

The world has lost its way. The hopes of the post-World War II period and the United Nations were dashed by the Cold War. Now the Cold War is over but the resultant unipolar world and the ascendancy of capitalism have brought about new threats.

No country is safe from marauding currency traders who in a few short days can demolish the patiently nurtured economies of the developing world. Far from curbing these highway brigands, they are lauded for their philanthropy. Robin Hood at least stole from the rich to give to the poor. These highway men steal from the poor and give a paltry sum to assuage their sense of guilt. They are no philanthropists.

The unipolar world dominated by a democratic nation is leading the world to economic chaos, political anarchy, uncertainty and fear. We are not going to recover and have peace for as long as threats are used for political and economic reforms that most of the world is not ready and not willing to accept.

If we want to have democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights, the powerful must demonstrate their commitment to all these noble ideas. And they can begin by restructuring the United Nations, in particular the abolition of the undemocratic single country veto. This

should be replaced with a modified veto where two veto powers backed by three other members of the Security Council would be needed to block any United Nations Resolution. But slowly even this should be dismantled in favour of majority decisions in the Security Council.

The other important agencies of the United Nations must be freed from the domination of any single country. Gradually they should be made more democratic.

The free market must be recognised for what it is - a market where the bottom line is paramount. It is not a political force for the disciplining of governments. For the right to exploit world trade, a tax should be levied by the United Nations and used by the United Nations to build needed infrastructure for the poor countries of the world.

Exchange rates should be fixed by an International Commission based on relevant issues. Apart from a small commission, no profits may be made by speculating or manipulating exchange rates.

Subsidies by rich countries for the production of food and other products must be forbidden although poor countries may be allowed for a stipulated time to protect their industries and food production.

The world has lost its way. The world is moving too fast. We need to pause, to take stock of things. There is a Malay saying that when one loses his way he should go back to the beginning. We need to go back to the beginning. If we dare to admit it, much of the problems that we face today are due to the arbitrary expropriation of the land of the Palestinians in order to create the state of Israel to solve the European Jewish problem.