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Dr M's corporate tax idea hailed

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IT was Liliane, the pretty young Burundi woman working at the Press office of the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) complex here who intimated that "the Malaysian leader's speech was veghy goodood".

"Oooh, yez yez. Eveghybody says its goodood. yezzz," she enthused in her liltng English. But Liliane ought to know. She had been asked by journalists and delegates to quickly make copies of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad's keynote address at the McDougall Memorial lecture on Saturday morning.

Liliane sort of confirmed the response to the speech by Malaysia's former Prime Minister that called for the establishment of a world corporate tax collection system in which the rich pay taxes to the poor from whom they have been making profits.

It was obvious that Dr Mahathir's address at the prestigious lecture had an impact on his audience who comprised Government leaders and officials from developed and developing countries.

After he ended his 30-minute address at the opening of the 32nd session of the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation Conference here, the applause came loud and long.

Dr Mahathir concluded by thanking FAO director-general Jacques Diouf for giving him the opportunity to speak on a subject he (Dr Mahathir) first raised in Hainan, China before an audience of businessmen, officials and intellectuals.

There, he remarked, the response was utter silence. There was a spontaneous muted chuckle from the audience as if to say that here in Rome, there will not be such a silence. There will be action.

Dr Mahathir's little remark had not escaped the attention of Australia's Minister for Fisheries, Forestry and Conservation, Ian MacDonald, who said that the silence in the Hainan forum was reflective of the support for his ideas.

MacDonald, who took to the rostrum immediately after Dr Mahathir in tribute to Frank McDougall, who was an Australian and the founding father of FAO, described the address by Dr Mahathir as an inspiration and encouragement for the FAO to do well in its endeavours.

Dr Mahathir, by his own admission, said that his proposal "might sound too idealistic, if not downright absurd". But, he said that new ideas, although seemingly absurd, should nevertheless be given some thought and pursued if the objective was to improve on the old or the current systems.

"Thus, those who believe in the benefits of the new ideas should persist and insist and fight against odds until eventually they are accepted or accommodated," he said, at the start of his address, Dr Mahathir was the 23rd speaker of the McDougall Memorial Lecture. He could have been the 20th speaker if Monsieur Diouf had been successful in persuading him to address the biennial conference the first time he extended FAO's invitation to Dr Mahathir who was then Prime Minister.

As far as the director-general was concerned, his hard work had paid off. Remarking on Dr Mahathir's proposal, Diouf said he had high-lighted the value of new and innovative ideas and thinking.

Indeed. for Malaysia, it is an added advantage to have Dr Mahathir's proposal on record.

Malaysia has an aggressive representation at the FAO, fighting for basic rights not only for the country but for the region and the Third World

against the mighty force of First World nations that already have strong agricultural fundamentals.

Dr Mahathir said in this world of plenty where there was more than enough food supply, there was still starvation in many parts of the world. This was because of inequitable distribution of wealth.

The need for the establishment of a world corporate tax collection agency is to ensure that poor nations can be made capable for building agricultural infrastructure that can enrich them.

A passionate advocate of the "prosperity-neighbour" policy, Dr Mahathir said the problem with a lack of development, was money. With money, a country can overcome the most daunting obstacle, as was the case with Libya when it built an artificial river to irrigate its desert.

Besides being the "morally desirable thing to do" in paying the proposed corporate tax, rich nations and corporations will not be losing out. They will, in fact, be enriching themselves by doing business, not in poor countries, but in well-to-do ones.

"Poor countries do not make a good market," Dr Mahathir said.

As a delegate said: "He is a pragmatist." Like him, most of the others had listened in rapt attention. They also got copies of Dr Mahathir's speech from Liliane.

"Now, the only thing is for us to see the system established," he said.