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Dr M: Set up NAM Business Council and have special leaders sessions

THE inaugural NAM Business Forum kicked off yesterday with leaders and ministers of the non-aligned grouping dominating the proceedings.

Taking the cue was the keynote address by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who mooted the idea of setting up NAM Business Council and special leaders and ministerial sessions.

South Africa President Thabo Mvuyelwa Mbeki, India Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Indonesia President Megawati Sukarnoputri and Thailand Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra also took part in the special leaders session. Business leaders, captains of industry and policy-makers will make their voice heard today.

At the end of the forum, they will adopt a 10-point declaration that generally highlighted the role of businesses in advancing political and economic growth and development in NAM countries.

The inputs will then be submitted to the heads of states and governments who would engage in the Summit proper from today.

Yesterday, the forum was told that the private sector's growth and expansion would spur the capacity-building of societies in NAM countries overall.

Problems and possible remedies, as well as reminders affecting member countries, were raised by ministers from Malaysia, China, Ghana, Sudan and Bangladesh at a special ministerial session on "Facilitating Trade and Investment Links Among South-South Countries: The Way Forward".

Human Resources Minister Datuk Fong Chan Onn said a critical issue faced by countries of the South was the shortage of skilled manpower caused by lack of investment in human capital.

He suggested that the countries expand existing programmes among themselves and explore new areas of opportunity.

Sudan Finance and National Economy Minister El Zubeir Ahmed El Hassan touched on the ever growing digital divide between the South and North.

"The digital gap has been fortified by the emergence of multinational and global firms protected by their regional blocs and encouraged by home countries' policies to merge and regroup themselves to form super companies," El Zubeir said.

Ghana vice-president Aliu Mahama said the South would have no option but to unite and pursue common or well-co-ordinated policies and programmes that would ultimately extricate them from sticky webs of restrictions and conditionalities.

"It is time the movement abandoned the path of self-pity and marginalisation, dependency and the relics of colonial mentality," said Ghana permanent representative to United Nations Nana Effah-Apenteng on behalf of his vice-president.

Bangladesh Commerce Minister Amir Khosru M. Chowdhury is hopeful that the forum will achieve a breakthrough in addressing issues relating to trade and development in developing countries, which accounts for four fifths of the world's population.