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`NAM needs Dr Mahathir's leadership'

Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad; Carolyn Hong

NST: Thank you for receiving us today (Thursday) even though I know that you are busy writing your state of the nation address for the opening of your Parliament tomorrow. Are you looking forward to your trip to Kuala Lumpur and what are your expectations?

Mbeki: I am looking forward to that. We are very pleased that Malaysia agreed to host the summit. As you know, it had been postponed. We are very glad that you are able to host it, in particular because the challenges we are facing in the Non-Aligned (Movement) require the leadership that Prime Minister Mahathir can provide.

Everybody is now, quite correctly, focused on the question of Iraq. NAM and UN have been engaged on this in the past month. When the Security Council was approached by the NAM for participation in a matter of global concern, it agreed for NAM to come into the chamber so that it can participate.

But it was a NAM initiative, and enabled other countries which are not part of NAM to come into this as well. So it's clear that the NAM continues to have an important role.

Q: It is very relevant still?

A: It is very relevant. The other point that all of us are grappling (with) here is the question of globalisation and the impact on the developing countries. It's obvious there needs to be an intervention of NAM with regard to that process.

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.

Q: In view of this, do you think that NAM should have a permanent secretariat rather than co-ordinating through the chairman and Permanent Representatives of member countries in New York?

A: The structure as it is now, with 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 matter of setting up a secretariat has been discussed quite extensively. I personally think that we need to give members more time to reflect on this, because I don't think you necessarily want to create institutions which are not going to add very much value.

Q: Malaysia according to various sources, is now the second-largest investor in South Africa, although the Asian economic crisis had resulted in some operations scaling back or closing down. What is your view of Malaysian investment, and what further opportunities are available?

A: (Smiles) Historically, we have very close relations with Malaysia. Malaysia was part of our own struggle for liberation and as we approached our own liberation in 1994, Prime Minister Mahathir was very interested to assist us economically.

While some people might have fears about stability and violence, Malaysia made a statement from the beginning that there was no justification for those fears. It made a statement not only by word of mouth, but in practical actions so that when people see Malaysian investors, it's a vote of confidence.

We are very interested in the Malaysian Bumiputera programme (the New Economic Policy) to balance society. Malaysian business people come here with that experience, and are able to impart it (their experience and

knowledge) into our society. That helps ease our own path towards black economic empowerment.

This is also a practical demonstration of South-South co-operation, that between the countries of the South. We could have economic co-operation of meaningful benefit to both countries.

I received a letter from Prime Minister Mahathir a few weeks ago. He was writing about NEPAD (New Partnership for African Development), in particular what the African continent needs to do to attract investment to achieve the development and growth that we need.

It was an important letter. He commented on Malaysian investment in South Africa but also talked about the continent in general. I'm certainly going to put the letter into the NEPAD process because it has very important observations relevant to meeting challenges on the continent.

The Malaysian experience of growth, development and transformation is relevant not only to us but to the continent. That kind of interaction with Malaysia really represents what should be happening when we talk about South-South co-operation.

Q: You are happy with our role here?

A: Absolutely.

Q: Since the end of white rule in 1994, how would you assess the progress towards deracialising South Africa? Has the white community accepted the change? What are the achievements of the programmes for economic empowerment of the black community?

A: The majority of the white population has accepted it, and many of them are very consciously and actively involved in the process. There will be a small minority that wants to go back to the old days. That is not going to happen. That's a small minority, not anything to worry about.

The first European settlers came in 1652, and you can see that we have had over 300 years of (a) colonial and racist system. It's going to take quite a bit of time to eradicate that legacy of racism, but progress is being made.

Look at schools which were racially segregated less than 10 years ago. If you go now to schools, you can see a lot of children, black and white. Sport. They are playing cricket now. It was not very long ago that you had a whiteonly cricket team, rugby and so on.

That meant that the black population did not have access to sports facilities. All the major sports now have development programmes targeted at the people who were discriminated against.

With regard to the economy, you have the emergence of some major black companies, and some smaller ones. There is the gradual integration of the black community as owners of property, managers, directors of companies, and workers across the board.

It's a matter that we address continuously. Tomorrow, when we open Parliament, I have to address this again. It's necessary to speed it up.

Q: Has the people's support for your Government diminished or increased?

A: The support for the ANC is increasing all the time. In the 1994 elections, the ANC had 62 per cent of the vote; in 1999, 66 per cent. That is also reflected in local government elections.

The reason is that people can see practical benefits. One of the first things we did, in 1994, was free food for children at school. Because of poverty, many children did not eat anything at home before school.

Q: We had that problem 30 years ago.

A: The problem is still here. We said pregnant mothers and their children up to the age of six must get free hospital treatment. We were surprised when we saw the response as we even had white women who responded. We didn't know that there were such levels of poverty among the whites.

So the people can see material benefits. They get clean water and electricity. They get a free house. The Government builds the house and says here is your key.

The ANC is now 91 years old, so there are generations which can say that this is our organisation. It has never abandoned us, never betrayed us even now when we are free. The people will continue to support us.

Q: Your general election is next year?

A: Yes. We have a regular programme here where everybody from local government to the President goes out to the people to discuss things with them. The people will say, we want the following. And we will stand up and say, we understand that you want it, but we don't have the money. So you won't get it this year, we will do it in two years.

The people appreciate the frankness and openness. The interaction between the Government and the people is there. They have a very good sense of what the Government is thinking and doing, and the Government gets a sense of the expectations of the people. So we don't need to be campaigning, because we are with the people regularly.

Q: People say crime appears to be an intractable problem. How is the Government tackling it? What are the prospects of returning to a virtually crime-free nation as some say it was before liberation?

A: There is a wrong perception about the crime problem here. There is a crime problem, as in other countries. The misperception arises from two things. Before 1994, 85 per cent of the police were in white areas. So, the white population was very well protected, and the black population was not protected. The white areas had much lower incidence of crime.

When things changed, we needed to ensure that policing spread right through the country and all the population. The white segment began to experience crime, and they are now saying that crime has shot up. If you go to black areas, they will say the opposite, that crime has diminished since 1994. It's a different experience. But the white population controls the newspapers and so on. The perception is not true, that crime has gone up since 1994.

Q: Have you increased the strength of the police force?

A: The number of police has increased. The police was an important instrument for the enforcement of apartheid. So, the black people were the enemies of the police. There has been a change in that attitude. The police are now not oppressor, but protector. So you find co-operation between police and communities.

The communities are able to go to the police, and police have become more effective.

We are now in Cape Town. You can walk and go anywhere, nothing will happen to you. In this region, 75 per cent of the murders occur between Friday and Sunday, and in the black areas, not in the streets of Cape Town. There is a clear pattern in crimes of murder, assault or rape.

The poorest areas have a serious problem of drug and alcohol abuse. This area, to the east of Cape Town, is a big wine-producing area. Traditionally, wine farmers paid their workers in part with alcohol. For a very long time, we had a serious problem of alcohol abuse.

That is why between Friday and Sunday, and over the weekend, there is too much alcohol abuse; because of that history. They are friends, they sit together, and drink and argue. The crime of murder is one with the highest rates of solution because the people who are killing one another, know one another. It's because they have been drinking.

Q: Since becoming President in 1999, what would you say are your biggest successes, and challenges? How would you like to be remembered?

A: (Laughs) There were two challenges. Once we had introduced new policies after apartheid, the challenge became to implement them. The

Government must function properly, as well as institutions to implement the policy. The economic, health, education policies are there, the thing is to ensure that the policies produce results.

The second relates to the rest of the African continent. Historically, we first had to get rid of colonialism and gain independence, before dealing with questions of economic development.

What happened in this part of the world was that colonialism became very stubborn. The whole continent became independent, and we (South Africa) were the last. The liberation of South Africa enabled the continent to say that we have now finished the struggle, now we must start economic development.

That is why we have raised this question of NEPAD, and African Union. The continent is seriously trying to address this question of development.

Q: South Africa wields influence in the continent. How can Africa better integrate into the international community, and shed the persistent negative image? What is the likelihood of success in your vision for an African Renaissance?

A: (Smiles) It is important that we, as Africans, pay attention to questions of African unity and development. And that means a number of things.

For instance, the ending of conflicts on the continent. It's important that we, as Africans, ourselves intervene to end those conflicts.

Q: African problems must be solved with African solutions.

A: It's of critical importance, because if we as Africans are unable to find an African solution to an African problem, and depend on someone else, we can never develop. We will always wait for someone to come and do something for us.

Of course we need foreign investment, but there are investment sources on the African continent. We can't say we only depend on foreign investment. What about the resources that we have here?

When we talk about a New Partnership for African Development, that must include what we have here. Let's pool our resources.

You take this country. One of the leading electricity utilities in the world is the South African Electricity Supply Commission. It's a very big electricity company. Here's this African resource, the continent needs electricity, why don't we use this to help to resolve electricity shortage in the continent?

That is partnership among Africans; use African resources before we say to the world, please come and help.

There must be a bit more self-reliance, and focus on the solutions by ourselves. It's only that way that the African continent can gain the respect of the rest of the world.

One of the things that strikes me is the way ordinary people are responding to this vision of an "African Renaissance". When I visit African countries, I see the response. They are very much taken up by this.

I think the continent will succeed because it's not just a matter of the leadership. From the grassroots, they are saying: Let us do something.

Q: How serious is AIDS and HIV in South Africa?

A: There is an AIDS problem in this country and the continent. We need a comprehensive response, from raising awareness among the people to change their behaviour, to community-based care for dying people.

There is a big programme here against mother-to-child transmission. There are problems. One is that these mothers should not breastfeed. But what are you going to do with a poor mother who cannot afford to buy baby-food? Where is the baby going to get food? We are doing some work with regard to that.

There are also other challenges; the traditional community don't understand a mother who does not breastfeed her own child.

So you need a comprehensive response, including addressing the question of what leads to immune deficiency. Malnutrition and common illnesses will lead to it. You need to respond in a comprehensive fashion.

We have allocated a lot of money to it, for drugs and to support people, as well as dealing with the conditions that lead to the collapse of the immune system.

Q: The Commonwealth. What's happening regarding Zimbabwe?

A: When we met at the Commonwealth in Australia last year, it was decided that this troika (South Africa, Nigeria and Australia) should meet to look at the report of the Commonwealth election observers, and if it was negative, to take a decision on sanctions from reprimand to suspension.

The report was negative. We then imposed a suspension for one year. There are no questions of the sanctions being lifted. We imposed a punishment for one year, and the one year will come to an end.

Now, the question is being raised that the troika should impose additional punishment on Zimbabwe. We are saying the troika does not have the mandate.

We said to the Prime Minister of Australia that he, as the chair of the Commonwealth, should consult with Commonwealth members on additional sanctions on Zimbabwe.

It would be illegal for us to impose sanctions, which we don't have mandate for.

We have been saying to the PM of Australia that the resolution also says we must engage the Government of Zimbabwe. What the PM of Australia does is, instead of engaging Zimbabwe, he wants to impose sanctions.

Of course, he says Australia is entitled to take its own positions. That is correct but Australia is also chair of the Commonwealth. How is the Commonwealth going to implement the resolution to engage Zimbabwe when you have a resolution that Australia is not going to talk to Zimbabwe? That's an Australian resolution, but the Commonwealth resolution is to engage Zimbabwe.

Q: Why do you think that (John Howard) does not want to?

A: I don't know. A number of countries have taken a position on Zimbabwe. We have been in contact with the Zimbabwe Government and pointed out things that have gone wrong. We pointed to the land issue, and say we don't agree (with) the violence. Even now, there have been complaints about legislation that is against freedom of the Press and democratic rights.

We have asked them to respond to the complaints. That's precisely what they have done. They are going to amend this law in Parliament this month, to address the complaint.

The land question. We said it was wrong to have a policy to make the white Zimbabweans landless. Land redistribution, yes, but there are white farmers who are now without land. They have agreed, and are talking to make sure that the white Zimbabweans also have land. As a result of engagement, these things will change.

But there is another approach from somewhere else, which is regime change. You have Australia and so on, who just want a removal of President Mugabe. But we are saying that is the responsibility of the people of Zimbabwe.

Q: Do the British also want a regime change (like the Aussie Premier)?

A: They have been saying the same thing.

Q: Do you think that the Anglo-Saxon powers - the US and Britain - have hijacked the United Nations? In one breath, can you imagine a world

without the UN?

A: No. We have to insist on the importance of multilateralism and multilateral institutions, but we also have to insist on the democratisation of these institutions.

We have been saying that whatever decision on Iraq must come from the United Nations. The question has such big implications, you can't even confine it to the Security Council.

It's important for NAM to insist that countries should not, because they are strong and powerful, just act unilaterally any way they like. It can't be correct. This period of globalisation which further integrates the world emphasises the importance of the multilateral organisations. It must govern this world which is getting more and more integrated.

Q: My final question. You may want to answer this. I'll understand if you don't. What is your relationship with Nelson Mandela? Has it been easy to follow Mandela? What exactly does he do now?

A: (Laughs) The relationship is very good, there is no problem. He decided on his own to retire. And he has. He is very supportive and does various things which he is very interested in. Children, for instance. He runs a children's fund. He is also very interested in veterans, and tries to assist. We asked him to handle the peace process in Burundi, and we will do other things like that. He keeps himself very busy.

He runs a very active campaign to encourage businesses to establish schools and clinics in rural areas. He goes around to companies to introduce villages to them. He works a lot on things to do with the upliftment of the people.

The one advantage we have is continuity in ANC with regard to policy. When Mandela retired, he did not leave a policy vacuum. We knew what to do. It makes it relatively easy because it's a continuation of policy. It's basically to build on what we have achieved.

NST: Thank you very much.