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Good of Chirac to have enlarged dialogue for G8

Hardev Kaur

FRANCE, the chairman of the Group of Eight (G8), hopes to make the grouping more inclusive. In an effort to achieve this, President Jacques Chirac has invited several leaders from developing and emerging countries for a discussion with leaders of the eight most industrialised countries.

The "enlarged dialogue" to be held on the eve of the G8 Summit in the French Alps, according to Chirac, is to foster "an open discussion on globalisation and world governance".

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad will participate in the enlarged dialogue in his capacity as chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM). Others invited include Brazil, Mexico, China, India and Morocco (as chairman of the G-77) and five members of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad).

In addition to leaders, Chirac has made it clear that in preparation for the summit there must be "sustained dialogue with various elements of civil society, particularly with non-governmental organisations, business and trade unions".

France wants the summit to be more inclusive and that leaders of the rich industrialised countries be sensitive and aware of the plight, concerns and views of poor developing and emerging countries.

Chirac wants North-South issues to be discussed and wants to ensure that the G8 summits are more "inclusive". France is keen to see that the grouping of the eight most powerful countries is not viewed as an exclusive club. But this, in fact, is exactly how the G8 is viewed by the rest of the world.

The grouping of the world's most industrialised countries - Germany, Canada, US, France, Italy, Japan, UK and Russia - which accounts for 60 per cent of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP), has also been criticised by NGOs, civil society leaders as a closed and an exclusive club.

Actions and decisions of the G8 impact on the rest of the world and yet poor countries have no means of ensuring that their views are heard and taken into account by the "rich man's club".

Thus, the move by Chirac to host the pre-summit dialogue will enable more to express their views directly to the eight leaders before their summit. This is the first time the "enlarged dialogue" or a more inclusive dialogue is being organised.

At the summit in Kananaskis in Canada last year, four African heads of state - South Africa, Algeria, Nigeria and Senegal - were invited to present their proposal for Nepad. France is expected to announce concrete proposals for Nepad during the summit.

Even though the members say that it is not a "world governing body" or "a board of directors" of the world economy, the fact remains that its decisions and actions have an impact and do govern the rest of the world.

The Plaza Accord, for example, had an adverse effect on the economies of developing countries, including Malaysia. With concerted effort to put pressure on the yen, developing countries with yen loans found their debt increasing overnight and saw their hard-earned fortunes being reversed almost overnight.

France is determined to see that the world's views of this rich man's club are more positive and that the G8 also listens to others. In fact the grouping as it is known today was set up in 1975 at the initiative of the then French President Valery Giscard d'Estiang and German Chancellor

Helmut Schmidt.

Designed as an "informal fireside chat" its emergence took place at a crucial time in international economic environment - the breakup of the international monetary system in 1973 and the abandoning of the gold standard.

The "enlarged dialogue" by the current French President also comes at a crucial time in world economy. The existing financial architecture is crying out for reforms, as the multilateral and multinational institutions seem unable to cope with the crisis. The "one size fits all" remedies do not work. Other remedies and solutions are badly needed and different views and those of developing countries must be considered.

The developed G8 members cannot pretend that other countries do not exist. What happens in developing countries - in Africa, Latin America and Asia - affects those in the rich countries. The globalised world has become interconnected and interrelated and this is not only in economic terms. It also extends to social areas as well.

Thus, the French initiative to invite others for discussions with the members of the rich club will offer the G8 leaders an opportunity to hear first-hand from leaders in developing and emerging countries. Issues that have been "over-looked and ignored" but of vital importance to numerous developing countries demand urgent attention and solutions.

The meeting in Evian will be even more significant. And this is not only for the fact that the agenda is laden with issues of concern and importance to developing and emerging countries but also as this will be the first face-to-face meeting of US President Bush and his ally in the Iraqi invasion British Prime Minister Tony Blair with the opponents - Chirac, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and Russian President Vladimir Putin.

The tensions remain and the world will watch how they handle the bread and butter issues after the invasion. According to French officials, the leaders will focus on four principles - responsibility, solidarity, security and democracy.

In keeping with the emphasis of democracy and the need to ensure that the views of others are taken into account, will the next chairman of the G8, the US, follow France's example and invite others for discussions ahead of next year's summit?