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## Hosting international meeting a first for Swaziland

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NEVER has Swaziland, a kingdom with a population of 1,123,605 hosted an international conference but tomorrow, King Mswati III, the head of state, will host more than a dozen heads of state and government from Malaysia and southern and eastern Africa when the Smart Partnership Dialogue convenes for the sixth time in Africa.

They have held regional conferences in the past but a dialogue of such nature, which brings together several high-profile leaders such as Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, President Robert Mugabe of Zimbabwe and President Olusegun Obasanjo of Nigeria, is a first for Swaziland.

The dialogue is held at a time the world is seeing a new world order emerging following the United States' invasion of Iraq while locally, the Swazi Government is facing mounting pressure to reform its constitution.

At one stage, the organisers were unsure whether the Swazi Government was able to hold the dialogue due to a wave of protests by the opposition and NGOs.

But after a national conference was held to discuss the constitutional change, which the King and Queen Mother personally attended two months ago, the Swazi Government gained support to proceed with the dialogue which is also known as the Southern Africa International Dialogue (SAID).

"Poor people came up to show their support. Some offered goats as a contribution," said an official.

Dr Mahathir, who has been instrumental in getting the African leaders to the discussion table through the dialogue since 1996, will arrive in Mbabane, the Swazi capital, early tomorrow morning.

The Prime Minister initiated the Langkawi International Dialogue (LID) in 1995 bringing together the Government and the private sector to develop the smart partnership concept but when leaders of the developing economies in Asia, southern and eastern Africa and the Caribbean took part in the second LID in 1995, the concept gained recognition and worried many.

Some European countries were concerned about the possible economic impact as a result of the co-operation between leaders from these regions.

This prompted Dr Mahathir to dismiss the claim by certain quarters that Malaysia wanted to be a godfather to some African countries via smart partnership fora.

President Joaquim Alberto Chissano of Mozambique also assured the Western countries that they had nothing to worry about because the LID and SAID were "not against anybody".

"The movement hopes to find ways to make the world a better place. The West and others could share their views with the movement," said Chissano.

At the 2001 SAID, President Yoweri Museveni of Uganda had brushed aside concerns of the West that the dialogue was a conspiracy against others. "We are not meeting here to conspire to rule the world; we are meeting here to survive in the world," he had said.

Tomorrow's dialogue at Emulzini Valley will be the 12th smart partnership dialogue to be held since its inception. Six were held in Langkawi.

At this dialogue, the leaders will discuss how to enhance global co-operative security through smart partnership dialogues. They will search for common ground on international order, tolerance and collective responsibility and collective action for a safer world.

For the Swazi Government, the dialogue is significant. The leaders of Swaziland will tap the thoughts of their smart partners on how to handle their current problems of balancing tradition with modernity.

The discussion will not only involve the leaders. The Queen Mother and Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali will also attend the parallel sessions to exchange views and share their experiences on the issue.

Politicians, civil servants, trade unions leaders, media and culture groups and young leaders will also give input on how Swaziland could handle "tradition versus modernity".

Dr Mahathir will deliver his speech tomorrow at the opening dinner. But will it be his last smart partnership dialogue?

Appeals are expected from the African leaders for him to continue sharing his thoughts with them in future dialogues after his retirement this October.

The leaders are expected to pay tribute to Dr Mahathir who has assisted them in changing the social, political and economic landscapes of their countries through the dialogues.

He has helped change the attitude of their governments toward many things, including globalisation, the roles of governments, private sector and trade unions and foreign direct investments and why they need to "prosper thy neighbour".