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Mbeki: KL ready to lead (HL)

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MALAYSIA is well-placed to take over the chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement as it can provide the strong leadership needed at this time, South African President Thabo Mbeki said.

Mbeki, who will hand over the chair to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad at the Feb 20-25 summit in Kuala Lumpur, said he believed that NAM continued to have great relevance.

"We are very glad that you (Malaysia) are able to host the summit, because the challenges we are facing require the leadership that Prime Minister Mahathir can provide," Mbeki said in an interview.

He said NAM had been working very closely with the United Nations on the question of Iraq, and had been able to participate at the Security Council level.

"It was a NAM initiative (to request participation), and it enabled other countries which are not part of NAM to come on board as well. So it's clear that the NAM continues to have an important role."

He said the UN Security Council resolution to continue engaging Iraq was at the urging of NAM, indicating the movement's continuing relevance in international politics.

He said NAM must continue to emphasise the importance of multilateralism and reject unilateralist moves by countries which were strong and powerful. He said this was even more important now as globalisation had brought the world closer together and made countries interdependent.

Mbeki, who succeeded Nelson Mandela as President of the Republic of South Africa in 1999, also spoke warmly of close bilateral ties arising from Malaysia's constant and enduring support of the African National Congress' struggle for liberation from apartheid.

He said after the end of white rule in 1994, Malaysia was proactive in helping South Africa economically, and its investors had led the way in showing that fears of instability and violence were mis-placed.

"When people see Malaysian investors here, it's a vote of confidence in us," said Mbeki.

He added that South Africa was interested in Malaysia's New Economic Policy because its black economic empowerment programme was also aimed at restructuring society and creating a more balanced economy.

He said Malaysian investors in South Africa had brought along their experience with the NEP, and were able to help the republic integrate its black community into the economy, slowly but surely.

Mbeki said Malaysia's close co-operation with South Africa was a practical demonstration of South-South co-operation.

Mbeki referred in particular to a letter written to him by Dr Mahathir several weeks ago on the New Partnership for African Development (NEPAD) programme.

He said Dr Mahathir had addressed the issues of attracting investment to the African continent.

"I'm certainly going to put the letter into the NEPAD process because it has very important observations which are relevant to meeting challenges on the continent.

"The Malaysian experience of growth, development and transformation is relevant not only to us, but also to the continent."

On African development, and his vision of an "African Renaissance", Mbeki said Africans must be more self-reliant and find their own solutions

if they were to win the respect of the world.

"If we 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?"