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Speaking up for the South

PRESIDENT Thabo Mbeki has taken South-South co-operation to new heights - not just by coming to Malaysia again after six months, but by his very significant pronouncement in this latest visit that Kuala Lumpur play champion of the developing nations at the coming World Trade Organisation ministerial meeting in Cancun, Mexico. Coming from the leader of South Africa which, in its own right, is a big country and certainly a lot richer and more influential than many others in the developing world, the comment should remove doubts, especially from the West, about whether there can be genuine trust and co-operation among certain countries of the South. And about who should lead whom.

What Mbeki is saying is what all the other leaders of developing nations should be saying, even privately - that it is a question of what is being done in their interests and not so much by whom. In this case, the President is right to point out that Malaysia, as the current chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement, should play that role. South Africa was in that seat before this.

There are far too many problems besetting developing countries that need to be addressed at the WTO meet. For instance, the tying up of labour issues to trade and economic matters which has persistently bogged down discussions in the past needs to be tackled. Mbeki, through his meeting with Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, has opened the way forward by acknowledging the need for Malaysia and South Africa to have continuing discussions to effectively bring up the views of developing countries.

South Africa, which exports gold and diamonds, among other things, accrues a higher gross domestic product than Malaysia. And its population is twice that of Malaysia's. But the close bilateral and economic ties forged between the two countries since the dismantling of South Africa's apartheid regime have brought enormous mutual benefits. Malaysia, for instance, is now the third largest foreign investor in South Africa, playing a big role in the petroleum, telecommunications and human resource development initiatives.

Together, the two countries can work to unite the developing nations. In the final analysis this kind of collaboration will be a win-win formula for international trade in the face of globalisation.