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Speaking up for the Third World

THE 13th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement begins today in Kuala Lumpur and that favourite question for the last 10 years or so about whether this congregation of 114 mostly small countries is still relevant looks set to be answered quite resoundingly. Even the fact that this is the first NAM Summit in the 21st century pales in significance against other factors which might well thrust the movement back into the living daylight again.

Global politics, the basis on which NAM was formed in the first place, has changed tremendously no doubt. But it is the trend of the transformation that has become the focus today - one that still reeks of tyranny, injustice and war. It was just last month that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad spoke about the Third World War having started - a war of peace-loving people against perceptions of evil - and how everybody is living in fear.

The war is being fought, even discounting developments in the Gulf, where the United States and its allies are poised to invade Iraq despite mounting protests all over the world against such aggression. This and the unresolved question of Palestine against the US-backed Israeli onslaught are pressing issues in global politics and security for NAM to talk about.

Then, there's the subject of economics and world trade, which some say would now be the mainstay of NAM deliberations. There's plenty of this too. In fact, despite being predominantly Third World, the movement can be a force to be reckoned with in the multilateral negotiations at the World Trade Organisation if they stand united. There are 83 NAM countries in the WTO and by working together they can be an influential group in addressing issues which can safeguard the interests of developing countries.

There's plenty to talk about indeed in Kuala Lumpur but members should be on guard against reducing the summit, like some others previously, into just another talking-shop or debating society that nobody takes seriously. And for that to materialise, members must be reminded of the grim and sobering international backdrop against which the meeting is taking place, and the need for small countries to come together to be heard. The summit should be about unity of purpose, and must not be side-tracked by internal divisions.

To the delegates, Selamat Datang, welcome to Malaysia.