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PM: G8 dialogue with the developing, emerging nations a step in right

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THE enlarged dialogue of the Group of Eight (G8) with developing and emerging countries ahead of the annual summit of the industrialised countries is a breakthrough enabling developing countries to present their views direct to the rich.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, "It is something that had gone in the right direction and it was certainly much more than what we expected."

This north-south dialogue has been "a success" and is set to be repeated next year when US takes over the chairmanship of the grouping from France.

Dr Mahathir had expressed the importance of continuing this practice of meeting with developing countries ahead of the annual G8 summit.

This is the first time that 12 selected leaders from developing and emerging countries were offered the opportunity to sit at the same table and discuss issues of importance and concern to them with G8 leaders.

Dr Mahathir told the Malaysian Press that the dialogue, which started at 1.30pm and ended at 6.45pm at Evian, on the shores of Lake Geneva, showed that leaders from rich countries were willing to listen and pay attention to views from developing countries.

Previously the "exclusive rich man's club" did not offer such an opportunity.

For example the chairman of NAM was only allowed to present a memorandum two years ago at the G7 meeting in Tokyo.

French President Jacques Chirac, who initiated the enlarged and inclusive dialogue, had argued that: "If we want everyone to benefit from globalisation and approach it responsibly, it is critical for everyone to have a seat at the table and take part in discussions needed to control globalisation and make it more human."

The countries represented at the pre-summit dialogue account for 80 per cent of global Gross Domestic Product and 80 per cent of world trade. In addition to the 12 leaders from developing countries, Chirac also invited the Swiss President to the meeting.

Dr Mahathir, who represented the 116 NAM members and also spoke for Malaysia, thanked Chirac for initiating the dialogue.

The Prime Minister explained why such a dialogue was important, giving the example of the Plaza Accord, which increased the debt burden of developing countries when the G7 co-ordinated their policies to increase the value of the yen and thereby reduce Japanese exports.

But this had a devastating effect on countries with debt in yen. In Malaysia's case its yen loans increased almost 200 per cent because of the decision of the G7.

Dr Mahathir added that such a situation might not have come about if the views of developing countries had been heard.

The dialogue was also very useful and effective as there were positive views from the G8 countries as well as the international agencies like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

Dr Mahathir commended US President George W. Bush for the US\$15 billion (RM57 billion) to fight AIDS/HIV and stressed the importance of overcoming new diseases such as SARS, which do not have vaccine as yet and the nature of the illness is still unknown.

He warned that if no international effort were taken to deal with these diseases, it was possible that there could be a pandemic that would

afflict the whole world because it was easy for people to travel thousands of kilometres very quickly.

Asked on the tone of the meeting, he said the leaders avoided confrontation and controversy.