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Summit participants expected to present views against what US, allies want

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THE 13th Non-Aligned Movement Summit in Kuala Lumpur this week is expected to do exactly what the United States and its allies hope it won't.

The 114-member NAM, which represents the overwhelming majority of the 191 United Nations member states, is poised to send a strong message to the US and Britain that the world is against unilateral military action against Iraq.

As support for the US and Britain for a possible attack against Iraq dwindles by the day, they may have to deal with another blow as leaders of NAM nations are expected to state their stance that war is not a solution to international conflict - a position that the US and its allies cannot possibly ignore.

Both the outgoing chairman Thabo Mbeki, the South African President, and incoming chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the Malaysian Prime Minister, have been vocal in criticising aggression, which gives an early indication of which direction the summit will take over the issue of Iraq.

Senior officials from NAM member nations will begin deliberations today to set the tone for Saturday's ministerial meeting and the summit over Monday and Tuesday.

They will discuss four draft documents - the Final Document and the Kuala Lumpur Declaration, which will contain NAM's positions on various global issues of common concern, and two separate statements on the threat of war in Iraq and on the Palestinian issue.

The issue of terrorism will also be high on the agenda.

The documents will be dealt with comprehensively by the senior officials before they are passed on to the foreign ministers who will meet on Saturday.

The ministers will then adopt the statements before handing them over to the leaders for a decision.

Some 60 heads of state or government will participate in the Kuala Lumpur Summit, which will be the highest number since NAM's inception in 1961.

The high participation will in itself put to rest the contention that NAM, set up during the Cold War by countries supporting neither the communist nor the capitalist bloc, is no longer relevant.

In fact, at the end of the Kuala Lumpur Summit, NAM would have grown to become a grouping of 116 countries - the latest being St Vincent and the Grenadines, and Timor Leste.

This clearly reflects the confidence of newly independent states in NAM as a force to be reckoned with.

Criticism aside, diplomats and scholars agree that NAM is not only still very much relevant but also a respected organisation.

The Cold War has ended but world peace is still threatened by extremism, discord, aggressive nationalism and terrorism and large stocks of weapons of mass destruction.

The dynamics of globalisation have produced a whole set of new problems which the NAM must take note of. The trends are not encouraging.

While the developing world is largely supportive of mutually beneficial global integration, it has major concerns which are not being addressed in the new global agenda.

These are equitable balance between rights and obligations of investors, particularly multinationals; extraterritorial application of domestic

laws; intrusive and calculated invocation of human rights and conditionalities of environmental protection and preservation; and the opening-up of national economies tied to grant of aid and trade concessions.

Non-aligned countries are increasingly pressured to conform to an agenda defined and driven by others.

There has not been parallel progress in the economic field. Gaps, disparities and injustice still prevail in the relationship between developed and developing countries.

The world economy is erratic and still plagued with uncertainty and uneven growth. The developed countries are still the frontrunners while countries of the South still lag.

These are the changes that NAM wants to see, and these are the challenges that lie ahead.

There are greater opportunities that must be seized, and new problems demanding common effort and proper resolution.

The burden rests squarely on the movement and the Malaysian chairmanship for the next three years.

NAM's leadership, commitment, credibility and relevance will be tested in the coming years. There are potentials too, but it will depend on how much effort the movement would put into these potentials before they are realised.

It will be an arduous task, given that NAM is governed only by principles and not binding treaties or a charter. But NAM members can break barriers, overcome petty bickering and achieve common goals if they are united in their cause.

Without doubt, there will be attempts by the powerful and the influential to pressure the movement. This is especially so because NAM's struggles include freeing itself from the dominance of the superpowers such as the US who continue to dictate terms in the less developed world - whether politically, socially, or economically.

Being the biggest gathering of nations after the UN, NAM should take it upon itself to shape the future of the world.