

Despite trials and tribulations, Muslims have generally emerged stronger – OIC Chairman

The Malaysian Prime Minister attended the World Islamic Economic Forum as Chairman of the OIC and delivered a speech that resounded loudly among the delegates at the summit.



■ *Malaysia Prime Minister; "Since the early days of Islam, Muslims have been faced with many challenges..."*



■ *Sunway Convention Centre, Malaysia - venue for World Islamic Economic Forum.*

Whether the summit was a success or not will be known in the near future. However, it remains an important event that took place in Malaysia, with the hope that it will be repeated in other countries in the years to come.

Abdullah Badawi said that the event was a good indication that Muslims around the world are able to stand united and to forge new alliances. He said his belief in positive collaborations that will enhance social and economic progress as well.

The PM said he hoped the forum will help identify new trade

and investment opportunities in their respective countries, which will invariably help to improve the understanding of Islam and bring their communities closer together.

"Since the early days of Islam, Muslims have been faced with many challenges that range from holy wars in defense of the faith to the present day fight against global terrorism. Despite all these trials and tribulations, Muslims around the world have generally emerged stronger and steadfast in our belief of Allah and Muhammad (Peace be upon him) as our prophet," he said.

The Malaysian Prime Minister

said he was glad the Muslims have rediscovered the need for better unity and solidarity with the Muslims around the world. He also said that many governments in the Islamic world were now initiating dialogues with the local leaders, a sign that shows there will be a healthy discourse and appreciation of Islam as a tolerant, peace loving and progressive religion. "It is important for Muslims to become stakeholders in their respective national development agendas by playing an active role in the socio-economic progress of their countries. Only by being proactive will we ensure that our interests are duly recognized and protected," he said.

The OIC Chairman said he appreciated the fact that many more Muslims were living outside the borders of the OIC countries, with some large Muslim communities in India China and Russia. Combining these populations together with the OIC Muslim populace will provide the Muslims with an immensely huge Islamic consumer market for Muslim products and services. He called for fresh strategies and policies to be implemented to cement the Islamic world and urged for the commitments from all levels of society, including the non-Muslim friends of the Islamic nation.

While maintaining that economic and trade statistics have not been favorable for the O.I.C which has a collective Gross Domestic Product (G.D.P) of less than 5 percent of the total world's figure, and intra trade volume at 1 trillion U.S. dollars (which is about 7 percent of the world's global trade, the Malaysian PM said he wonders what is it that actually hinders the O.I.C from recording a reasonable

world trade share of at least two digits.

"The O.I.C has recorded a declining share of trade within developing countries. From a trade share of 47.5 percent in 1980, the O.I.C share has fallen to 22.1 percent in 2001. One major reason is that member countries often place a heavier emphasis on trade with industrialized non-O.I.C countries. Major contributors of the intra-O.I.C trade such as Malaysia, Saudi Arabia, The U.A.E, Turkey, Iran and Indonesia have industrialized non-O.I.C countries as their top three leading trade partners," he said.

The PM said that one more major problem the Muslims were facing was the heavy dependence of the Muslim public on assistance from other nations and organizations, while other members of the Islamic community were suffering from the poor distribution of wealth with large structural divides between the haves and have-nots. He said that Muslims should follow the Quranic (The Muslim Holy Book) and Prophetic injunctions and teachings that required Muslims to act as a single unified mass. "Geographical barriers should not divide Muslims," he said in essence.

As a solution to the problems that affects the Islamic communities worldwide, the O.I.C chairman suggested the following :

1. The Muslim world needs the availability of an enabling physical infrastructure that provides the right environment for economic activities to take place. Public utilities and telecommunication facilities constitute the backbone of development and this



■ *We should move forward in a unified manner.*

- need to be transformed to enhance efficiency.
2. This includes investment in Human Capital and Education, two sectors that needs to be given fresh vigor. A highly talented and skilled labor force is essential to maximize the opportunities presented by the evolving economic environment. Education is key to enhancing the capacity of Human resources. The full range of learning opportunities must be deployed to ensure comprehensive development of human capital, which should include groups such as women and the less fortunate among the Muslims.
3. The need to acquire knowledge is important as we enter into the era of the knowledge-based economy. Knowledge has become a key ingredient to both human and economic

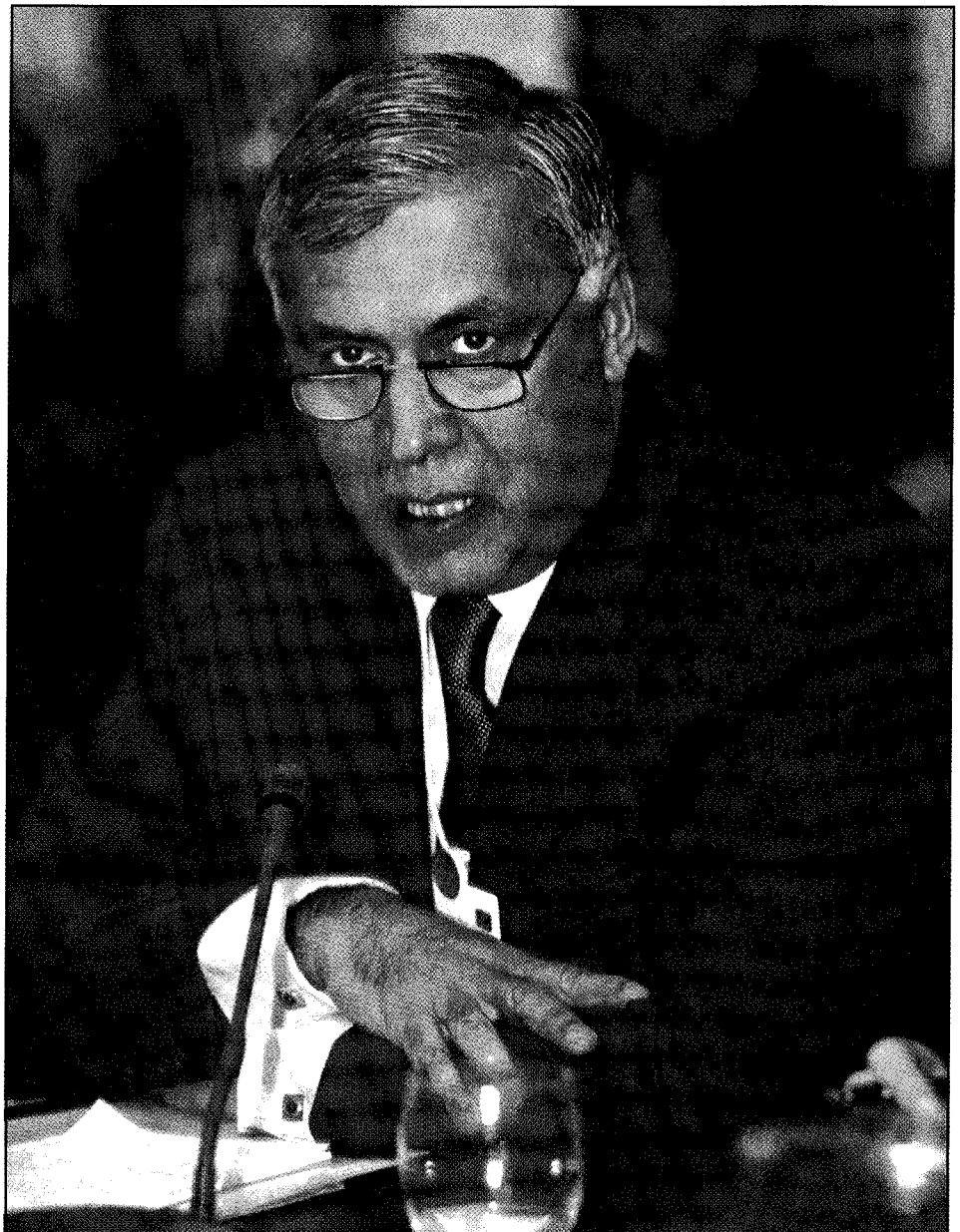
development. The lesson to be learned is that we will not be able to compete and prosper without enriching our knowledge base. This is because knowledge has become the main driver of economic growth.

4. The forth prerequisite calls for the diversification of sources of growth. From predominantly oil and gas. The long-term challenge is to sustain economic growth by reducing over-reliance on these. The services sector, including Information and Communication Technology or ICT as well as financial services, offer vast possibilities for generating economic growth as well as provide employment opportunities.
5. The fifth requirement relates to the need to develop the rural areas since a large proportion of the population in Muslim



nations lives in such areas. Rural development must be given greater emphasis. The development of small and medium enterprises would offer a possible solution to reducing poverty and bringing progress and development to these people.

It is undeniable that the challenges faced by Islamic countries are immense and requires detailed examination. The onus is on us to introduce much needed change to our present situation as well as bring about development and progress to the Muslim Ummah. To accomplish these goals, we need to be united and committed to ensure that economic wealth and progress is fairly distributed, which will require close consultation and coordination at all levels and across all sectors. We need to pursue greater economic convergence and interdependence between ourselves and promote a culture of dialogue for the settlement of disputes. We have to draw upon our strengths, not only from our diverse cultures and background, but also through the application of positive spiritual values of peace, and harmony and tolerance concluded the Prime Minister.



■ *Pakistan Prime Minister, Shaukat Aziz.*

On the other hand, Pakistan's Aziz spelled out what he called the "roadmap" to Muslim economic development during his speech at the World Islamic Forum in Malaysia.

Aziz said the proposal to economic progress for Muslim countries, including overcoming crippling conflicts and promoting better governance was to translate the tremendous potential

of the Muslims into assets.

He Muslim nations had so far failed to realize their economic potential despite holding vast resources of 70 percent of the world's hydrocarbons and exporting 40 percent of raw materials globally.

"While many Muslim nations have developed and prospered and their people enjoy high standards of living, it is also a fact that nearly

24 percent of the world's Muslim population earns less than a dollar a day and an average of 39 percent live below the poverty line," he said in a keynote address.

Aziz, who is also Pakistan's finance minister, outlined what he called a "roadmap" to make the most of the potential of Muslim nations.

He said countries' economies had to be

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restructured through deregulation, liberalization and privatization to promote growth, while ensuring good governance to attract investment.

"If we don't have good governance and structural reform and transparency, no country can leverage its potential. If we keep perpetuating a government which is not reforming, which is not governing properly, then we are really hurting them rather than helping them," said Aziz.

He also called for a strengthened role for the Islamic Development Bank, the lending and investment arm of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, and more emphasis on good governance in funding initiatives.

"The bank and many other multilateral institutions in the world should spend as much time in improving the governance and reforming a country as they do in financing a project," he said.

Other components of his roadmap include greater unity and cooperation among Muslim nations, better social services such as health and education, more resources for education, and a more prominent role for the 57-nation OIC.

Aziz also said that the conflicts dogging some Muslim nations had to be overcome because they had distracted leaders from pursuing economic progress.

"Some Muslim countries confront internal dissensions while others remain embroiled in differences with each other," he said.

"These countries have not been able to leverage their full potential and harness their resources for development owing to their preoccupation with such political issues."

Aziz said negative perceptions of Islam, including links made between terrorism and the religion, were the biggest problem facing Muslims, and that it could only be overcome by better economic progress.

"Our image is being shaped by the extreme actions of a tiny minority of extremists who exist on the fringes of Muslims societies," he said.

"We can only negate this image and prevent people from behaving irrationally by leveraging our potential and improving their standard of living," he said.

The World Islamic Economic Forum, supported by the OIC, has gathered more than 500 delegates from 44 countries including government officials, business leaders and non-government organizations to discuss greater economic and business cooperation.