

# U.N. treats some nations as 'more equal than others,' says Mahathir

*We excerpt from the address of Malaysia's Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad to the plenary of the 46th Session of the U.N. General Assembly on Sept. 24, 1991. Subheads have been added.*

. . . Mr. President:

The world has witnessed in the last two years more revolutionary changes than in the preceding hundred years. Without doubt these changes have opened new and historic opportunities to build a better world, anchored firmly in the rule of law, the sovereignty of nations, and a collective commitment to social and economic justice for all. The world is ripe for "a new world order," but it is hoped that this new world order will not be one that is imposed upon the world by the main beneficiary of the current revolution. All members of this august body called the United Nations should participate in the shaping of the new world order if we are to avoid a return of a new colonial era.

When the United Nations was formed after the Second World War, the allied victors assumed the right to create a world order in which each of the five major powers could veto anything that does not serve them. But then the five fell out and the East-West conflict divided the world into two antagonistic camps. The Cold War that followed not only retarded modern civilization, but converted poor countries into pawns and proxies, devastating their territories and economies with confrontations and wars. That they were not fighting their own battles is clear from the outbreak of peace in every continent as soon as the East-West confrontation ended.

With these experiences still fresh in our minds, how can we be assured that a new world order formulated by any one country or group of countries will be good for everyone? We are already feeling heavy hands forcing us to do this and not that. In East Asia we are told that we may not call ourselves East Asians as Europeans call themselves Europeans and Americans call themselves Americans. We are told that we must call ourselves Pacific people and align ourselves with people who are only partly Pacific, but more American, Atlantic, and European. We may not have an identity that is not permitted, nor may we work together on the basis of that identity. Is this a foretaste of the new world order that we must submit to?

Democracy, and only democracy is legitimate and per-

missible now. No one really disputes this. In fact, speaking for Malaysia, we can think of no alternative but democracy in the context of our pluralistic society. We can also affirm that we have no intention of siding with despots or tyrants and those that deny their people their rights to democratic government. But is there only one form of democracy or only one high-priest to interpret it?

We see differences in the practice of democracy even among those who are preaching democracy to us. Can only the preachers have the right to interpret democracy and to practice it as they deem fit and to force their interpretations on others? Cannot the converts too interpret the details, if not the basics? If democracy means the right to carry guns, to flaunt homosexuality, to disregard the institution of marriage, to disrupt and damage the well-being of the community in the name of individual rights, to destroy a particular faith, to have privileged institutions which are sacrosanct even if they indulge in lies and instigations which undermine society, the economy, and international relations; to permit foreigners to break national laws; if these are the essential details, cannot the new converts opt to reject them? We, the converts, will accept the basics, but what is the meaning of democracy if we have no right of choice at all, or if democracy means our people are consistently subjected to instability and disruptions and economic weaknesses which make us subject to manipulation by the powerful democracies of the world? Hegemony by democratic powers is no less oppressive than hegemony by totalitarian states.

Democracy means majority rule. The minority must have their rights, but do these rights include denial of the rights of the majority? Admittedly the majority may not oppress the minority, but if the minority exercise their rights without responsibility, become the agents of foreign democracies, and try to weaken their own country so as to make it a client state to certain democratic powers, must the majority in the name of democracy submit to the minority?

## Democracy among nations

If democracy is to be the only acceptable system of government within states, shouldn't there be also democracy between the states of the world? In the U.N. we are equal, but five are more equal than the rest of the 166. Seven countries on their own lay down the laws which affect adversely the economies of others. A few nations on their own have

taken it upon themselves to determine the new world order. Powerful trade blocs demand voluntary restraints and impose laws and rules extra-territorially. Clearly the states of the world are not equal; not in the U.N., not anywhere. If democracy is such an equitable concept, why must we accept inequality between nations?

All these point towards an unhealthy and an undemocratic relation between nations. Yet equality and freedom is supposed to be the sole guiding principle of this modern civilization.

When the U.N. was formed in 1945, the victors of World War II arrogated to themselves the right to dictate the roles and the distribution of power between nations. Many things have happened since then. The victors of 1945 are no longer the powerful major players in world affairs. New powerful nations have emerged, while some major powers have changed structurally. And new ideas about rights and wrongs and democracy have crystalized. Are we going to be shackled forever to the results of World War II?

If the international democracy, as represented by the U.N., is to be meaningful and effective, there must be an infusion of some of the current ideas and realities. The world needs policing, as the Gulf war demonstrated to us. But are we to have self-appointed policemen or are we to have a police force that is beholden to this august body, the U.N.?

### **U.N. police actions**

Police action by the U.N. needs to be governed by principles, and rules. Laying siege and starving out a castle or a city until the people had to eat rats or starve may seem appropriate and acceptable in the olden days. But can our conscience remain clear if a whole nation is starved into submission? Can our conscience be clear if the principal victims are the old and the infirm, the pregnant mothers and the newborns, the young and the innocent?

With the advent of modern weapons, should wars be fought or police action taken by destroying the recalcitrant nation totally in order to avoid casualties among our police force, and above all to avoid the demoralizing coffins being brought home? Is it truly possible that everything that is hit by massive bombs and rockets is military in character?

Is the Geneva Convention still relevant in the conduct of war? We condemn chemical warfare, but must we still have the nuclear weapons around? Are the people who possess them responsible and concerned about the horrendous effect of these weapons and will [they] not use them other than as a deterrent? Who determines when a deterrent is needed?

The leaders of nuclear nations, the people who will push the nuclear buttons, are not safe, as events in the Soviet Union amply demonstrated. We cannot even be sure that someone irrational might not become a leader and gain access to the button. Accordingly, the existence of all nuclear weapons cannot be justified in the present world.

The U.N., which is playing the role of inspectors in Iraq,



United Nations

*Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad addressing the General Assembly on Sept. 24.*

should extend that role to supervise the destruction of all nuclear weapons everywhere. More, it should supervise the invention and production of other diabolical weapons. Weapons for defense should be solely for defense, and their capabilities must be such as to prevent them from being used as weapons of aggression except in a limited way. Researches in new weapons by all nations should be reduced and no weapon should be sold by anyone without permits issued by the U.N. Malaysia has joined efforts with other delegations at this General Assembly to work towards a U.N. Arms Register to provide transparency and confidence building, as a first step towards giving the United Nations a comprehensive authority over disarmament.

We need weapons only for fighting criminals. If a nation is subjected to armed uprising, then the U.N. should take part in putting it down. Democratic governments should only be brought down by democratic process. Anything that goes beyond democratic processes should merit U.N. intervention if a request is made. We cannot preside over the disintegration of nations into ethnic communities, particularly if military action had no role in the initial consolidation of a nation.

Perhaps it may be asked why a tiny developing nation like Malaysia should be advising on how the world should be managed. We should not, except that what the world does

and what some nations or even individuals do, can affect us and affect us adversely.

Today individuals in some developed countries consider it their right to tell us how to rule our country. If we don't heed them, then they consider it their right to destroy our economy, impoverish our people, and overthrow our governments. These people latch on to various causes, such as human rights and the environment, in order to reimpose colonial rule on us. They are helped by the western media which also consider it their duty to tell us how to run our country.

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All these combine to make independence almost meaningless. Our only hope lies in the democratization of the U.N., especially as the option to defect to the other side is no longer available to us. We want to remain independent, but we also want to conform to international norms as determined not by some NGOs [non-governmental organizations] or the so-called advanced democracies, but by all the nations of the world. If we default, then it is the U.N. and not some Robin Hoods which should chastise us.

Mr. President,

We are glad that the winds of change have brought about significant developments in South Africa, which we hope would bring about the dismantling of apartheid and the start of negotiations towards a new democratic and non-racial South Africa. All these would not have been possible without international solidarity, with the United Nations system playing a key role in putting the necessary pressure on Pretoria. Despite these important developments, international solidarity, as manifested in the 1989 United Nations Consensus Declaration, must be maintained to meet the still difficult challenges ahead and ensure a successful conclusion to the process of change in South Africa. Right now priority must be given to putting an end to violence in black townships, reviving the preparatory process for constitutional negotiations involving the Pretoria regime, the ANC, Inkatha, and

others, as well as addressing the problems of social and economic inequities brought about by decades of apartheid.

### **Plight of Palestine**

While the climate of peace and dialogue has benefited many parts of the world, the Middle East remains the most volatile region, and the Palestinian people continue to suffer under the cruel and illegal Israeli occupation. The current United States peace initiative has raised the hopes of many nations, including Malaysia, for an active peace process that would lead to a comprehensive solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, including the establishment of an independent state for the Palestinians. We welcome the initiative and commitment of President Bush and Secretary Baker in undertaking this difficult task and wish them well.

The plight of the Palestinian people touches the heart of every Malaysian. We would like the Palestinian people to be treated fairly and justly. If what they do to protect themselves is considered criminal, then the same deeds committed by the Israelis should be considered equally criminal. Governments which kidnap and kill people should be condemned even more than desperate freedom fighters who are forced to violence because they can seek justice in no other way. The accelerated buildup of illegal Jewish settlements in the Occupied Territories is an act of unwarranted provocation by the Israeli authorities and constitutes a very serious and unacceptable obstacle to the current peace efforts. In our view Jews in the Soviet Union are better off there, where their entrepreneurial skills could be put to good use to re-build the economy of the country.

### **Question hangs over Earth Summit**

Mr. President,

Next year the nations of the world are expected to meet in Rio de Janeiro to discuss the environment. If we are to meet there, there is a need to know whether it is going to be a constructive meeting or a finger-pointing, Third World-bashing session.

If that conference is going to be productive, then let us face the facts and deal with them. Unless we accept the truth regarding the sources and causes of environmental pollution, rising temperatures, and ozone depletion, we are not going to get anywhere in our efforts to reverse the process. If we go to Rio, let us go there to discuss and agree on a common course of action on environment and development.

The idea that the tropical forests can be saved only by boycotting tropical timber smacks more of economic arm-twisting than a real desire to save the forests. If selective logging and sustainable management is prevented and consequently the forests become no longer a source for wealth, the worthless forests may be cleared in order to produce food crops, or to provide firewood in poor developing nations.

On the other hand, the vast potential for reforestation has hardly been touched. The deserts of California can be

converted into a tropical forest, complete with rain-forest flora and fauna, simply by pumping the ground water and planting trees. Instead the underground water is being used for golf courses and artificial lakes to surround luxury hotels. If we can build sophisticated warplanes at \$1 billion apiece, surely we should have the ingenuity and the money to create tropical forests out of deserts? Libya should be congratulated for tapping underground water to irrigate its desert. It is shameful that nations richer and more advanced than Libya have done nothing significant to green the world.

The use of CFC [chlorofluorocarbon] and fossil fuel is greatest in the richest countries. Is there really a need for CFC for spraying when a simple rubber bulb can do the same? Do the countries with huge populations of monster automobiles really need to use them, when there can be small cars or efficient public transport systems using electricity generated by hydro-power plants?

We in the poor countries would like to have some cheap hydro-electric power. True, we have to sacrifice a few thousand acres of our forests. But we can spare these, for we have millions of acres more. But all manner of campaigns are mounted against our proposals for hydro-electric projects. Now of course the World Bank will be used to deprive poor countries of cheap hydro-electric power. And all these after the rich have developed most of their hydro potentials. Can we be blamed if we think this is a ploy to keep us poor?

If the UNCED [U.N. Conference on Environment and Development, which is sponsoring the Earth Summit] is to be meaningful, let us hear now of the plans for the rich for reducing their own contribution to the environmental degradation. If the sole approach is to link aid to poor countries with what they must do environmentally for the well-being of the rich, then UNCED would be a lost opportunity.

### **GATT, a wealthy nations' monopoly**

Mr. President,

Economic growth in a poor country cannot depend on the domestic market. To grow, poor countries must have either aid or free access to foreign markets. It would be near suicidal for poor countries to keep their market to themselves. On the other hand there is every reason for the rich to keep their markets for themselves.

GATT [General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade] is conceived to promote free and equitable world trade. But how can poor individual countries argue their cases in the GATT Round when the huge trade blocs monopolize the meetings? Who would listen to the plaintive arguments of a tiny, insignificant Third World country?

To be heard, the poor must band together, not to form impoverished trade blocs, but to lend weight to their arguments. And so the East Asia Economic Group or EAEG was proposed, not as a trade bloc, but as a forum for the nations of East Asia to confer with each other in order to reach agreement on a common stand for a common problem caused

by the restrictive trade practices of the rich.

We are perplexed to find that this objective merely to have a voice in international affairs is being opposed openly and covertly, by the very country which preaches free trade. It is even more surprising that there should be such opposition when NAFTA [North American Free Trade Agreement] itself is being formed on the principle of the right of free association of independent countries. Can it be that what is right and proper for the rich and the powerful is not right or proper for the poor? One is tempted to suspect racist bias behind this stand.

### **Restructure U.N. organs**

Mr. President,

Malaysia has supported the U.N. at every turn. We believe that the U.N. is the only legitimate instrument for creating an equitable world, for protecting the weak and the poor from the pressures of the strong. We welcome the end of the Cold War, but we must admit to nowhere else to look except to the U.N. More than ever before, we need a greater role for the U.N. in the affairs of the world.

While we believe a restructured Security Council has a vital role to play, we would like to see a balanced constitutional relationship, including accountability between the General Assembly, the Security Council, and the Secretariat, in order to truly make the United Nations the guardian of peace as suggested in the secretary general's report of 6 September 1991. Related to this, the Malaysian delegation has joined efforts with others to deliberate on ways and means to revitalize the organs of the United Nations, including the General Assembly and Ecosoc [the Economic and Social Council]. The experience of the Gulf conflict also makes it imperative for the United Nations to explore and put into effect all the potentials of preventive diplomacy, including a more pro-active role on the part of the secretary general and expanded U.N. peacekeeping operations. Malaysia believes that the time has come for the international community to explore also the potentials of the International Court of Justice, the judicial organ of the United Nations, as a means of fostering the resolution of conflict by peaceful means and in accordance with the rule of law.

Mr. President,

The international community is now at the proverbial crossroads. We truly have a chance to build a better world through consensus and to use the United Nations as the principal forum and vehicle for achieving our objectives. We cannot afford to miss this historic opportunity to benefit from the peace dividend resulting from the cessation of the Cold War. It must, however, be underlined that a global consensus approach requires tolerance for different ideas and practices inherent in our complex and pluralistic world. There is simply no place for an international order based on hegemony and domination. Let us then work together as partners in our common endeavor to build a better world.