

# Mahathir steps up South-South diplomacy

by Lydia Cherry

If there is one relatively small country whose influence has grown considerably over the last decade and has become crucial in fighting for the developing sector, it is Malaysia under the government of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. Here, the line between industrialized and developing countries is seen as not a fixed one, and the Mahathir government forecast, in releasing its next 10-year New Development Policy during June, that "Malaysia will become a fully developed nation by the year 2020." Greatly expanded South-South cooperation is regarded by the government as instrumental for Malaysia or any other country to make this jump, and putting into operation various alliances to enhance South-South cooperation appears to be the highest goal of the Mahathir administration.

Since the end of the Gulf war, the country's diplomatic activity has picked up steam. During the first week in June, Sudanese President Lt. Gen. Omar Hassan Ahmad al-Bashir arrived in Kuala Lumpur. During his three-day stay, the two sides mapped out plans and signed agreements to increase cooperation in the economic, scientific, technical, and cultural fields. Dr. Mahathir and General al-Bashir reportedly had several "fruitful discussions."

## Long-term planning assistance

Sudan right now needs all the help it can get. Because the country was pro-Iraq in the Persian Gulf war, it is now a U.S. target—one more problem for a country with severe economic problems and which is overrun with refugees from the neighboring Horn of Africa country Ethiopia. Of particular importance, it was agreed during the visit that Malaysia would assist Sudan in carrying out its long-term economic planning. The Sudanese leader told the Malaysian press that Sudan could gain from Malaysian experience in economic and industrial development. There was also discussion of Malaysian assistance in developing Sudan's oil industry, and Sudan will increase the number of military officers it sends to training establishments in Malaysia—tapping Malaysian experience in counter-insurgency warfare.

Beginning June 19, Dr. Mahathir will make a two-week official visit to Brazil, Argentina, and Chile. These visits, according to statements by the Foreign Ministry, are expected to focus around "consolidating bilateral and economic ties in the spirit of South-South cooperation." Matters to be raised

include international and regional issues such as Pacific cooperation, the rise of regional trade blocs, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), and cooperation among developing nations.

## Democracy for developing nations

U.S. trade warriors, under the cover of the AFL-CIO, in early June unleashed a new war against Malaysia and its closely aligned neighbor, Thailand. The AFL-CIO and the International Labor Rights Education and Research Fund in Washington, have accused Malaysia of discouraging union activities in the electronics industry. The trade warriors' plans are to cut off the Generalized System of Preferences (GSP) which allow developing countries duty free imports into the United States on certain items.

However, if there is one area in which some Malaysian leaders have become truly adept, it is in recognizing and identifying what lies behind certain notions of "democracy." Human Resources Minister Lim Ah Lek discussed the matter at the 78th annual International Labor Organization (ILO) conference in Geneva June 7. The international community could truly help in developing countries' efforts to promote workers' well-being, he said, both by "recognizing the prevailing situation and needs of different countries" and "by providing technical assistance." But instead, he said, some sections of the international community were choosing to brand "policies and strategies of developing countries to become more industrial-based as being discriminatory and against universal principles of human rights." This use of "human rights" and "democracy," he continued, was not only unfair to the governments but also to the people of developing countries.

Dr. Mahathir picked up on the democracy theme once again in replying to Vice President Dan Quayle's diplomatic gaffe in late May that any Asian grouping in which the U.S. was not included would automatically be "counterproductive." "There is such a thing as democracy between nations," Mahathir emphasized. Industrialized nations, such as the United States, if "they are truly champions of democracy, must not try to block international cooperation. Opposition to the [Mahathir-initiated] East Asia Economic Group (EAEG) is a good example of developed countries trying to block an effort initiated by a small country; where is international democracy then? They may criticize democracy in Malaysia but they must also respect democracy between nations!" Mahathir added, with a laugh, that if Quayle's premise was correct, it was really quite remarkable that the European Community has done as well as it has.

As a May 28 Soviet commentary on the bloc initiative noted, "What irritates the U.S. most of all is the fact it is not included, while Japan is automatically a member. As the Americans are ambitious about achieving supremacy in Asia and the Pacific, it is understandable why the U.S. administration cannot accept this plan."