

# Promoting unity among Muslim countries

Sun.T 18 APR 1993

Dr. M. -  
Oversea trips.

**T**HE Prime Minister declaimed a common theme during his visits to Bangladesh and Pakistan in February and to Uzbekistan and Iran recently — Muslim countries must unite and stand together with the rest of the Third World.

Inherent in the discussions he had with leaders of these countries was the argument that only with unity can there be strength for the Third World to influence the scope, character and nature of the New World Order that the strong and powerful nations of the First World are trying to create.

With the easing of tensions resulting from the end of the Cold War, all States, big and small, old and new, rich and poor, have to work together to build a *better world order*, based no more on hegemony or coercion but on mutual respect and co-operation.

With unity and strength, they can reject the Western imposition where the powerful countries after the Gulf War arrogate to themselves the right to interfere in the affairs of other nations, on such matters as human rights, democracy and workers' rights.

"Whenever we are threatened by the imposition of foreign values, it is important for us — weak countries — to work together and co-operate to protect our independence," said Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad in Uzbekistan.

The leaders of Iran and Uzbekistan and even Pakistan and Bangladesh, inspired by the principles of Islam, emphasised during Dr Mahathir's meeting with them on the indivisible nature of human rights comprising civil, political, eco-

**Much goodwill was gained by the recent visit of the Prime Minister and his delegation to Uzbekistan and Iran. Some tangible results are already in the pipeline and more is expected soon, reports ZAINON AHMAD.**

nomic, social and cultural rights.

They also reaffirmed their conviction that the right to development was an integral part of fundamental human rights.

"Every nation, big or small, should have the right to choose its ways of developing the country," said Uzbek President Islam Karimov.

Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani said his country had experienced some problems recently and this had held up the development of the country after the war with Iraq.

"Some problems which seemed very complicated in the past three or four years have become soluble, and Iran would be one of the countries with the least problems in the next four or five years," he said.

Dr Mahathir said most countries were unable to develop because of internal problems and he was glad that Uzbekistan did not put political reforms ahead of economic reforms.

"Where politics move ahead, things move too fast and the situation becomes unsettled, thus undermining economic development," he said.

In Iran, he noted that the measures introduced to liberalise the economy and the encouragement given to private sector participation and that as a result of the new openness, more foreign

investors were becoming interested.

While it is understandable that leaders of Muslim countries should express sentiments of this nature, more loudly whenever their morale is low — in the light of the campaign to link Islam with terrorism and the paralysis that has gripped them over the question of Bosnia and Palestine — it is imperative that they interact with each other.

Instead of indulging in rhetoric, Dr Mahathir decided to do something about it. Interact, promote goodwill and trade. And this was the reason for his visit to Bangladesh, Pakistan, Uzbekistan and Iran.

He said that by the leaders visiting each other, they understood each other better, their countries interacted better, trade prospered and the countries became strong.

Others are exploiting the Palestine issue, Azerbaijan, the continuing conflict in Afghanistan and the Middle-East peace plan because Muslim countries are unable to agree with each other.

The Prime Minister's message was: "Muslim countries should interact more and co-operate more economically and politically. It is the division among us — not held together by a strong common purpose — that causes us to be easily divided by others.

"We should concentrate on common issues that can

unify us while avoiding issues that tend to divide us."

He said the enthusiasm shown towards suggestions for linking such regions as the Economic Co-operation Organisation (ECO) — Iran, Turkey, Pakistan, the Central Asian republics and Afghanistan — with other regional organisations in the Middle East and Asean was a positive indication.

"The linkage could benefit not just Muslim nations — all of whom are Third World countries — but other Third World countries as well," said Dr Mahathir.

He invited members of these organisations to join Sittdec (South Investment, Trade and Technology Data Exchange Centre), one of a number of mechanisms both at multilateral, regional and sub-regional levels to facilitate and enhance trade and economic links between countries of the South.

Sittdec is located in Kuala Lumpur and provides the avenue for South countries to increase trade, investment and technology flows among them.

The Prime Minister described as too grandiose the suggestion that Muslim countries form a common market. He said the scheme would be difficult to take off as Muslim countries are far apart.

"Even in the case of the European Common Market, where member countries are contagious to each other, it is difficult to work what more with us who are

far apart."

He said the countries must interact and trade with each other and other countries of the Third World and not to be too dependent on countries of the First World.

"Our trading partners have always been the rich countries of the North like Japan, Germany and the United States. But now we too discover that they also have economic problems which can affect Malaysia's trade.

"Therefore, it was necessary for us to develop new trading partners from countries of the South. We have been fairly successful in Latin America, some African countries, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia."

It was also important for Malaysia to develop trade relations with the new countries of the Third World — the Central Asian republics.

The country discovered in the few days of talks the leaders had with each other that it was important for them not only to meet each other but to be friends with each other.

"We cannot expect results immediately, even while there are some immediate benefits, but the long-term results are more tangible and rewarding," he said.

The Malaysian delegation led by the Prime Minister, however, achieved much in Iran where several joint-venture projects were agreed to and Malaysia's trade with the Persian Gulf

nation is about to improve significantly.

But a major achievement was made during Dr Mahathir's meeting and discussion with the powerful *ulamak* of Qom, some of whom are members of the council which scrutinises legislation passed by the *majlis* (parliament).

They agreed with him that Muslim countries must progress and be strong and that they must unite and to be able to achieve all that they must accept without bias all systems compatible with Islam.

The *ulamak* of Qom were impressed with the Malaysian Government's reminders to its people to avoid extremism while emphasising Islam's tolerance and pragmatism.

Dr Mahathir told them that Muslim nations were weak politically and economically and were unable to unite because they were divided by ethnic, sectarian, ideological and personal differences of the leaders.

The discussions were facilitated by the late Ayatollah Khomeini's son, Hojjatolislam Ahmad Khomeini, who agreed that problems such as Bosnia, Palestine and Afghanistan could only be resolved with Muslim unity.

"It is only when Muslim nations are economically strong and politically united that they will gain the respect of others and be able to influence world events," said Dr Mahathir.