

25/03/1997

Chance to effect change at the UN

THE double veto by the US that blocked a Security Council resolution against Israel's settlement construction in Arab east Jerusalem drives home the point Malaysia has been making at the United Nations: the veto must go. In last week's case, Mr Bill Richardson, the US Ambassador, cited the suicide-bombing incident in central Tel Aviv, which killed three women and injured more than 40, as reason for the US veto. In his words, "We think it's inappropriate to be taking a vote like this in light of the horrendous terrorist act that happened in Israel today."

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad sees it as American insincerity in dealing with the Palestinian issue, and not for the first time. Israel and Palestine had been so close to a peace accord, but Mr Benjamin Netanyahu thumbed his nose at the international community and directed Israeli bulldozers last week to move into the planned Jewish settlement site at Har Homa, known as Jebel Abu Ghneim to Arabs. "We sometimes don't understand whether the US is sincere or not when it makes a stand," Dr Mahathir said. "(The US) condemns Israel for building the houses but when we want to protest, it doesn't allow it." But then, is not the whole world bothered by the US stance on the Israel-Jerusalem issue? Dr Mahathir said he anticipated the US veto decision. That is why, the Prime Minister said, he has always stated Malaysia cannot depend on others to help it. Some people feel the US must be in the Far East to stave off possible Chinese and Japanese threats, but Dr Mahathir's response is, "Would (the US) help us if the assistance is not in their interest?"

A sincere answer to that question may never be forthcoming, unless the so-called Chinese or Japanese threat materialises, which Malaysia thinks is unlikely. But what was made apparent last week at the Security Council is the urgent need for UN reform. The world has suffered and tolerated double-talk and shadow-play for too long, and all this while the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis has worsened to become a political abyss that the outside world can no longer empathise with or resolve. If Washington is to continue using its veto power to block the peace process in West Asia, then it is about time the international community should act to compel the US into giving some straight answers. It is also high time the great powers in the Security Council pay out some peace dividends and submit to the demands of the majority in the UN.

In the light of the US veto, the proposals by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) President Tan Sri Razali Ismail on the enlarged UN deserve some serious consideration by the 185-member General Assembly. Razali is proposing the expansion of the Security Council by five permanent members and four non-permanent members. He is also proposing that the new permanent members not be given any veto power and that the current five be asked to restrict their use of the veto. In July, the UNGA may vote on the principle of expanding the council. Razali's initiative has been described as the first concrete sign of movement on the issue in more than three years of fruitless discussions.

The international community must be reminded, though, that the five permanent members of the Security Council which have the veto on any non-procedural matter are unlikely to be receptive to the UNGA President's plans. The most powerful entity in the UN, after all, has always been the Security Council; the veto is an instrument created to identify the "great powers" within the council of 15 nations. The UNGA comes only second in

terms of importance, followed by the Secretariat, which is headed by the UN Secretary-General. When negotiation of the Security Council enlargement resumes next month, the five great powers will undoubtedly put on a show of power and put up a fight. UNGA members are presumably equal (each with one vote) - it would be wise for them to make a stand and not budge when the time comes to cast votes. For once, nations in the world are faced with the prospect of effecting historic change at the UN: it will be a calamity if they squander this opportunity.

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