

16/04/1997

Forging Islamic unity

THE visit by Egyptian Prime Minister Dr Kamal Ahmed El Ganzoury to Malaysia has helped opened up opportunities not only for business and economic cooperation, but also for closer ties between the two governments. The memorandums of understanding and agreements signed by the governments would go towards promoting greater bilateral contacts between businesses and investors. As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has pointed out, there has been insufficient interaction despite all the avenues for cooperation between the two countries. A great deal needs to be done in order to tap the full potential for trade, economic and investment opportunities that have now taken centre stage in both countries' national development plans.

While bilateral trade has increased over the years, the value is still small and the scope limited. Trade with Egypt reached a mere RM625 million last year, or 0.2 per cent of Malaysia's total. Egypt has no investment in Malaysia while there has been only one Malaysian company investing in the country. The signing of the Investment Guarantee Agreement and the three MOUs on trade, tourism and economic cooperation is an undertaking by both governments that the level of cooperation, must move faster to help each other develop and capture bigger international market shares. Malaysian investment in Egypt, for example, would be its contribution to Egypt's economic reforms and structural adjustments. Egypt's call for greater foreign investments, moves towards privatization, deregulation and liberalisation affecting various industries, services, banking, manufacturing and information technology are in consonance with the worldwide trends towards globalisation and Malaysians should not miss the opportunities that these efforts present.

Closer cooperation between the two countries would also help give greater substance to cooperation among Islamic nations. So far, interaction within the Islamic world has been dominated by political issues and based on religious grounds. Very little effort, indeed, has been expended towards helping one another develop economically. By circumstance as well as choice, The Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), for example, has been pre-occupied with issues of peace and war in West Asia and other pockets where Islamic national sovereignty exists. But even this almost single-minded focus on politics did not guarantee the OIC the necessary clout to be able to put its foot down on the Somalian issue, the Kuwait invasion, and the ethnic cleansing of Bosnia-Herzegovina. Clearly, a greater unity and economic strength would not hurt the OIC in helping out the countries that it represents.

The recent summit of the OIC in Pakistan has been seen as a turning point by virtue of the stress member countries placed on economic cooperation. But a comprehensive multilateral economic cooperation among Islamic countries must be complemented by greater interaction among the Islamic countries, especially at bilateral level. This can be done at the OIC, or even at the Group of Fifteen or Non-Aligned Movement levels where many Islamic countries share membership. If South-South cooperation could improve by leaps and bounds through the various bilateral mechanisms introduced by the G-15, for example, the Islamic countries should theoretically find it easier to realise similar accomplishments.

Dr Mahathir has said often that Islamic countries have the capacity to play a crucial role in creating conditions for global peace and stability.

But this, he reiterated this week, cannot be achieved unless Muslims truly believe in Islamic brotherhood and cease to use Islam as an excuse for lulling other Muslims and undermining the political stability of Islamic nations. The Malaysian Government will continue to forge better relations with other Islamic countries. This year alone, Dr Mahathir has played host to, and visited, several Islamic countries, including Egypt, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Pakistan and Kuwait. More such visits need to be made more regularly, to get Islamic countries better acquainted.

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