

16/12/1997

## Reconciliation and peace for unity of the ummah

Zainon Ahmad

BY all accounts, the Teheran OIC summit last week was a success of sorts, at least for host Iran which seemed determined to transform itself from pariah to regional leader. It was the country's most important diplomatic event since its 1979 Islamic revolution.

For the Organisation of Islamic Conference, after almost three decades of existence, there seemed to be fewer platitudes and more realistic calls to make the organisation relevant in the document issued after the summit.

While stating its leaders' resolve to fight oppression against Muslims and their concern at tendencies to portray Islam as a threat to the world, the Teheran Declaration called for understanding and peaceful coexistence with the rest of the world.

An important consensus among the leaders was that the OIC must play significant and greater roles in international relations and for that to be possible they agreed that they must first have solidarity among themselves and a fresh outlook in global affairs.

A "vision statement" was also issued, courtesy of Malaysia but adopted wholeheartedly by members who seemed serious in wanting peace among themselves, unity, co-operation, independence and progress.

In line with the theme of the summit - Dignity, Dialogue, Participation - it spoke of the decision to establish an ad hoc committee to develop guidelines to strengthen regional and sub-regional arrangements to promote systematic dialogue as well as foster and reinforce co-operation and confidence between and among member states.

The statement rejected the "introduction or application of unilateral or extraterritorial legislation or any form of bilateral pressure which runs counter to the letter and spirit of the World Trade Organisation- and rule-based global trading".

The reference was obvious.

It was clearer in the declaration which took a swipe at the US law punishing non-American companies investing in Iran and Libya saying that the leaders "reject unilateralism and extraterritorial application of domestic law and urge all states to consider the D'Amato law as null and void".

Representatives of all the 55 members were there. More than half were represented by their heads of governments, proving false predictions by the organisation's detractors that only a handful of top leaders would attend and that some members might not even send representatives.

Iran's succeeded in its efforts to show a more benign face. The city was spruced up, decorated and lit at night - a stark break from its sombre past.

Just before the representatives arrived, workers unrolled a US\$1 million (RM3.8 million) rug inside a huge brand-new conference hall in the International Fairground at the foot of the snow-capped Alborz mountains.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who visited Iran three years ago, was impressed at the changes. He said: "There seemed to be a lot of physical improvements and hope they are all for the better."

Everyone talked about "a mature Iran" during breaks in the meetings and during dinners. That the country, condemned by the West as an exporter of terrorism, was succeeding in promoting itself as a land of peace and stability.

In fact, the Teheran Declaration condemned terrorism, which it stressed

was forbidden in Islam, but distinguished "terrorism from the struggle of peoples against colonial or alien domination or foreign occupation".

Evidently, Shi'ite Iran also succeeded in its efforts to mend fences with its Sunni Arab neighbours and foes. They turned up and during the various bilateral meetings between them, much seemed to have been "settled".

From Saudi Arabia came Crown Prince Abdullah, the highest ranking Saudi leader to visit Iran for nearly 20 years. From Kuwait, the supportor of Iraq in the Iran-Iraq war, came Emir Sheik Jaber al-Ahmed Al-Sabah.

Iraq was represented by its Vice-President, Taha Yassin Ramadan, and during his meeting with Iranian leaders, the two countries agreed to hold talks on disputes that include prisoners-of-war and Iran's backing for rebel Iraqi Kurds.

President Mohammad Khatami warmly welcomed Palestinian Authority President Yasser Arafat. Iran once accused the leader of the Palestine Liberation Organisation of selling out his people for participating in the now scuttled peace process with Israel.

And in a compromise between Iran and moderate Arab states, the Teheran Declaration made no direct reference to Persian Gulf security, but called for a panel of Muslim experts to discuss how to achieve "solidarity and security of Islamic states".

Teheran wants the expulsion of US and other Western forces from the Gulf, where they are deployed to protect neighbouring "moderate" Arab states from perceived threats from Iran and Iraq.

The UN Secretary-General, Kofi Annan, who spoke at the summit, said that the US forces in the area were there with the agreement of those governments, but hoped an easing of tension would reduce the arms race in the Persian Gulf region.

Leaders of the neighbouring Arab states, and others including Malaysia, seemed pleased with the way Iran hosted the summit and were encouraged by the sentiments expressed by Khatami in his speeches.

Dr Mahathir said after meeting Khatami: "Iran now wants peace and stability and is not threatening anyone. It has matured into a moderate state. Even as chairman it is neutral."

Bahrain Foreign Minister Sheikh Mohammed bin Mubarak al-Khalifa, also after meeting the Iranian president, said that there seemed to be a new direction in the country which he and his friends hoped would bear fruit in the near future.

"The important thing is to remove all doubts and deal with negative factors that prevailed in the past," he is quoted to have said. Bahrain used to accuse Iran of meddling in its affairs and supporting Shi'ite dissidents.

What Khatami told the Arab leaders in his meeting with them seemed reflected in the Teheran Declaration which stressed the need for "dialogue and understanding among cultures and religions" and rejected "theories of clash and conflict which breed mistrust".

All of which went to show that attempts by the United States to isolate the Islamic republic seemed to have failed.

Said summit spokesman Javad Zarif: "We believe the policy of the US to try to isolate Iran is unsound, unfounded and illogical, and maybe this summit is a small indication of that."

An assertion borne out by the presence at the summit of important US allies in the region - Jordan, Egypt and Turkey. This seemed to have given credence to a newspaper report which mentioned contacts between the two old foes for a possible rapprochement.

While the summit seemed to have achieved much for Iran in terms of its international image, delegates were aware of the numerous political

rivalries in the country, especially the power struggle between spiritual leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who succeeded Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini and President Khatami who replaced Ayatollah Ali Akhbar Rafsanjani.

While the groups had called for a ceasefire of sorts in the interest of successfully hosting the OIC summit, the rivalry seemed to have crept into the speeches of the two leaders at the summit.

In opening the summit, Khamenei spoke of the needs and expectations of the Islamic ummah, enumerating the obstacles ahead and finally recommending concrete means for their solution in order to realise the aspiration of the Muslims.

Khatami spoke of establishing a civil society and appealed for tolerance, understanding and effective co-operation between Muslims and non-Muslims to foster international peace, prosperity and stability.

Everyone hopes that the rivalries would fizzle out so that Iran, for its own sake, and in the interest of the unity of the ummah would be spared of another turmoil that would set the clock back for the country.

(END)