

19/11/1997

US should be rational and not be too sensitive

Dr S. Vijayaratnam

IT would appear that the United States and Malaysia are going through some choppy waters of late.

First, there is the issue of 34 Congressmen led by Robert Wexler who have tabled a draft resolution demanding an apology or the resignation of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad over his alleged remarks that the current currency and financial problems in Malaysia and Southeast Asia are the result of a Jewish conspiracy.

The second is in relation to the intention of the US administration to investigate Petronas because of its dealings with Iran, which is regarded by them to be an undesirable regime that is purported to be sympathetic to certain terrorist organisations.

In the first instance, it is not indicated as to whether the Congressmen are members of the House of Representatives or Senators.

Congress in the US consists of the House of Representatives with 435 members and the Senate which has 100 members, bringing it to a total of 535.

The opinion of 34 members, therefore, would be a small minority, and certainly not reflective of the opinion of the Government of the United States.

Furthermore, a draft resolution such as this would have to pass through many stages before it attains some meaning.

First, it would have to be vetted by the Foreign Relations Committee, and if ratified, would have to pass through both the lower and upper Houses.

It would then be subjected to presidential scrutiny, and in any case is non-binding.

It is a long process, and judging from the support it has received so far, seems to be doomed to be a non-starter.

The system of checks and balances enshrined in the American Constitution is so thorough that resolutions as foolhardy as this will be thrown out.

It would be a little premature to react so vehemently.

Anyone can say anything in the US. Some things will be said to gain political mileage and in this case, perhaps to cater to the Jewish lobby.

Not all American Congressmen are reknown for their tact or diplomacy.

Dr Mahathir was not anti-Semitic in his remarks; it is just a coincidence that the person he took exception to, George Soros, happens to be an ethnic Jew.

The possibility of fanciful ideas materialising in the US system of government are remote.

The more responsible majority that represent the US administration will surely look at this in a mature and objective fashion.

This is probably nothing more than a storm in a teacup. "The dogs bark, but the caravan moves on."

The second matter has more serious implications.

American allergy to companies (and Governments) doing business with its arch-enemy, Iran, stems from the ugly incidents that followed the overthrow of the late Shah in 1979, and the aftermath where US Embassy staff in Teheran were held hostage for more than a year.

Since then, relations between the two have been far from cordial, and negative sentiments against each other have been running high.

The US has linked many terrorist-related incidents to Iranian

sponsorship, and Iran has always maintained that America, the "great Satan", is out to get them in one way or another.

The fact of the matter is that the issue involves the US and Iran. It has nothing to do with other countries, much less, foreign firms.

To penalise a third party in this ongoing conflict would seem unnecessarily vindictive and immature.

By investing in Iran, Petronas is certainly not aiding and abetting the Iranians to annihilate the US nor its citizens.

The borderless world and unimpaird trade, so vociferously prescribed by the US, will not be so if they insist on such pre-conditions and restrictions.

Petronas, Total (of France) and many other companies have nothing to do with their problems. They are not even interested.

Therefore, the US administration is urged to take a rational look at this, and not be too sensitive. After all, Iran has not sulked over anyone dealing with the US.

However, it may be acceptable for Petronas to inform the US investigators over its Iranian investments, and show them that it has no sinister motives and has nothing to hide.

The more prohibitive Petronas seems, the more likely for all kinds of unfounded conclusions to arise.

Its trade procedures must be transparent to demonstrate that it has nothing to do with terrorism or anything so vile. It would probably make the US investigators look foolish.

The greatest power on earth knows there is little that lesser nations can do to counter its manoeuvres. But it must realise that there is even more greatness in magnanimity and tolerance.