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Muslims must remain united forever

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RECENTLY, two influential world leaders commented on how they envisaged the relationship would be between Western and Islamic civilisations and values in the coming century.

In an address to the United Nations General Assembly last month, United States President Bill Clinton defied the myth of the inevitable clash of the two great civilisations, as proposed by Harvard's Samuel Huntington.

While acknowledging that there were important differences that transcend race, culture and religion, Clinton ceded on a course of friendship and respect for the Muslim world.

"We will continue to work for common values, common interests and common endeavour," he was quoted as saying (NST, Sept 23, 1998).

Although Clinton was specifically addressing the problem of terrorism, the positive reference to Islam and the Muslim world indicated a genuine effort towards reconciliation and co-operation.

Early this month in London, the British Foreign Secretary, Robin Cook, also made encouraging remarks on the need to dispel the Clash of the Civilisations' thesis (NST, Oct 9, 1998).

While contending that misunderstanding and mistrust had been allowed to develop between the West and Islam, he proposed the beginning of a proper dialogue between Europe and the Islamic world, to ensure that the destructive Huntington's prophecy did not become self-fulfilling.

To sharpen his argument, Cook aptly quoted verse 13 of Surah Al-Hujurat (Chapter 49) of the Quran which is translated as:

"O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes, that you may know each other, not that you may despise each other."

The West, according to Cook, owed much to Islam. Islam laid the intellectual foundations for large portions of western civilisation.

From the numerical system to the understanding of the stars, much of the basis of the present civilisation is rooted in Islamic learning.

What we are witnessing are actually positive overtures from western leaders on the need to start pulverising the stereotypes and misguided attitudes that have been embedded in the heart of the strife and polemic between the two cultures.

These are the possible repercussions of the Muslims' untiring efforts of urging the West to discard their misconception of Islam. One such effort was undertaken by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad when he delivered a talk entitled, "Islam - the misunderstood religion", at Oxford University, in 1996.

In that address, Dr Mahathir alluded to the label most often used to describe Muslims - fundamentalist. The West equated it with extremism.

But the Prime Minister argued that the best Muslims were essentially the fundamentalists. They are the people who practise the most fundamental tenet of the Islamic teaching which is "to strive for peace".

Unfortunately, the West had displayed its lack of understanding of Islam by labelling those who deviate from the Islamic teachings by resorting to terrorism and violence as fundamentalists.

The misunderstanding is almost complete when, according to Associate Professor Mohamad Abu Bakar of Universiti Malaya, even Dr Mahathir's Islamic predisposition as shown by many of his speeches, constitutes enough basis for the western media to describe him as a "fundamentalist".

Realising its unique position in the world as the host of three major world civilisations - Chinese, Hindu and Islamic - and with an almost 10 per cent Christian population, Malaysia has embarked on a series of inter-faith dialogues in earnest.

A joint seminar on "Islam and its world-view" was organised with the Malaysian-American Commission on Educational Exchange. One of the resolutions that came out of the seminar read ... "there must be respite from the crude polemics of East versus West".

Another dialogue was held with the Goethe Institute where the theme, "The role and influence of religion in society" was chosen. The then German Ambassador to Malaysia reaffirmed the many common elements of Islamic and Christian religious and social orders.

An international conference on "The Islamic world and global corporation" was convened early last year jointly with the Oxford Centre for Islamic Studies.

One of the most important and significant proposals then was the establishment of an alternative media network in the Muslim world to combat biased reporting.

And we can see today how vital this network would have been for, not only the dignity, but also survival of the Muslim ummah.

Therefore, we are now at the mercy of the international media community, which is intent upon pitting one Islamic group against the other.

Another inter-faith dialogue in this country was entitled, "Towards a common civilisation", graced by Dr Roman Herzog, President of Germany. Herzog was impressed with the approach we had taken to promote inter-cultural understanding.

Towards the end of last year, yet another cross-culture event was co-hosted with the Japanese Institute of International Affairs. The aim of the symposium on Asia and Islam was to promote the understanding of Islam in Asia generally, and Japan particularly.

Malaysia's most recent venture into the inter-civilisational dialogue was the joint seminar with the European Union early this year.

A number of the participants expressed surprise at the fact that Islam actually flourished beyond the Middle-East. Malaysia, it seems, offers a different version of a modern and prosperous Muslim state.

These are some of Malaysia's modest endeavours to enlighten non-Muslims on the fundamental teachings of Islam. Further efforts to present Islam to Muslims and non-Muslims the way it should be are already in the pipeline.

That Malaysia can provide a truly Islamic modus vivendi in intercivilisational accord is not mere rhetoric. Neither is the claim an act of self-indulgence. Comments from foreigners, both Muslims and non-Muslims, on this matter are testaments of its genuineness.

The president of the European Commission, Jacques Santer, said in Brussels recently: "Malaysia is a good example of a modern, peaceful, stable and prosperous society, guided by the social and moral values of Islam."

Undoubtedly, speeches such as Dr Mahathir's Oxford lecture, had managed to create ripples which then turned into waves of the demystification of Islam. Malaysia's insistence on the world to accord proper respect to the second largest religion in the world has borne fruit.

Thus, the conciliatory gesture of Clinton and Cook must be taken in a good light. The Muslim world is once again being noticed by the West.

Meanwhile, Muslims must be constantly aware of the negative forces that are persistently trying to humiliate the religion. Beware too, that many of these forces are working outside the country. Hence, Malaysian Muslims must remain united, now and forever.

It is imperative that they avoid any move backward by resorting to petty

squabbles and mundane disputes. Disagreements, though allowed, must not make them lose sight of the higher purposes of the Islamic law, or their responsibilities to the ummah at large, as prescribed in the Quran.

"And obey Allah and His Messenger, and fall into no disputes, lest you lose heart and your power depart; and be patient and preserving, for Allah is with those who patiently persevere."