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Malaysia has the credentials in Asean peacekeeping force

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WHEN the Australians took up the leadership in initiating a multinational force in East Timor, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Asean should instead play a role.

His remarks are certainly apt as they involve a member of Asean.

Indonesia is a prominent member of Asean and has always been considered as primus inter pares.

It faces a problem which requires international assistance and what better body than Asean itself to play a role.

In retrospect, although the grouping has discussed security matters within the Asean Regional Forum framework, it has not seriously looked at the possible security structure of the organisation.

After all, it has never entertained the idea of a military system being developed under its umbrella.

The rationale for this has always been the possible suspicion of others if such a move were to take place.

During the 1980s, it was thought that Vietnam, which was then not part of Asean and was occupying Cambodia - and hence in confrontation with Asean - would regard such a development as being targeted against it.

Today, it is possible that China could misconstrue a military-type arrangement within Asean as an attempt to confront Beijing.

Therefore, such a thought has never been seen as an option. At least it is believed that the repercussions would be just too overwhelming.

However, it could well be that Asean should not look at the military and defence framework as an alliance.

Rather, it should be more towards peace-keeping and one that is not necessarily exclusively Asean. However, it should be Asean-led.

Given the East Timor issue, such a development is timely and Asean should consider starting the ball rolling.

Malaysia has a critical role to play as it has vast experience in peace-keeping operations and has always played a significant role in the international arena by promoting the interests of the developing world.

As a result, Malaysia has received many kudos from various countries and multilateral organisations, including the United Nations.

In as far as the latter is concerned, Malaysia's distinct contributions have been recognised in the form of a non-permanent membership in the UN Security Council.

Malaysia was also been appointed to the presidency of the 51st UN General Assembly.

Tan Sri Razali Ismail did the country proud when he took over the position. A Malaysian had actually reached the helm of this world body.

Malaysia has been consistent in its involvement in UN peace-keeping operations.

Beginning in 1960, it took part in UN operations in Congo, right until its participation in Bosnia.

Malaysia has been represented in a variety of UN military expeditions and been represented in all of the UN's military commitments.

The UN essentially sends combat troops and Malaysia had sent battalions to Congo, Namibia, Cambodia, Somalia and Bosnia.

Secondly, as observers, Malaysian officers have served in places such as the Iraqi-Kuwaiti border, Liberia and Western Sahara.

Thirdly, Malaysia was represented at the UN headquarters, and we had a

one-star general serving in New York, as well as a full colonel, attached to the Nato headquarters with regard to the Bosnian conflict.

A Malaysian three-star general was also appointed the UN Commander, heading the peacekeeping force in Somalia.

All in all, Malaysia has an excellent record of active service as part of the the UN's peace-keeping operations.

Apart from the army, the Royal Malaysian Air Force has also served under the UN.

The Royal Malaysian Police too have been sent as part of UN operations.

It would be fair to state here that within Asean, Malaysia is the most experienced in UN peace-keeping operations.

At one point Malaysia was the 7th largest participating force in the UN.

The army has also set up a peace-keeping training centre, which has received much praise from various quarters.

Therefore, Malaysia has a positive role to play in initiating an Asean peace-keeping force.

Such a force need not necessarily be a permanent standing force.

It could be a force designated by participating Asean countries as being dedicated to undertaking peace-keeping operations and it could be activated at short notice.

Regular exercises could be undertaken, in order to sort out what the military refers to as the standard operating procedures or SOPs.

By doing so, Asean could significantly contribute to not only taking care of its own problems within Asean, but also play a role outside the region, especially under the UN umbrella.

If such a force had existed, there would be no necessity for Australia to initiate deployment in East Timor.