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Use dialogues to address differences

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THE recent report that Serbian terrorists were using Kosovar Albanians as human shields by placing them around Nato bombing targets is disturbing.

The horrific pictures of the charred bodies of innocent civilians, who appeared to bear the brunt of the allied attack on the town of Kovisa, were splashed in the media.

They were gruesome. Such depravity by the Serbs represent one of many atrocities committed by an ethnic group against others in this decade alone.

Indeed, the end of the Cold War has witnessed the revival of many religious and ethnic conflicts. The Kosovar tragedy epitomises the reality of such phenomenon.

In Indonesia there was until recently an upsurge in inter-religious violence. In one incident late last year, a seemingly harmless street fight between Christians and Muslims in Jakarta ended up with several churches being damaged.

In retaliation Christians burned a number of mosques in West Timor. An international magazine recorded this comment from a Roman Catholic priest on the Indonesian tragedy.

"In these times of stress, despair and frustration, people become increasingly communed and primordial. The society's capacity to handle pluralism has been lost."

Elsewhere, in Orissa, India, an anti-Christian campaign peaked in January with the slaying of an Australian missionary and his two young sons.

There are many other examples of violent conflicts between religious and ethnic groups. In short, many innocent lives have become sacrificial lambs at the altar of religious misunderstanding, distrust, intolerance and fanaticism.

These bleak episodes are a grim indicator of the state of inter-civilisational relationship that is set to dominate the world in the years to come.

Hegemonic uniformity and conformity appears to be the name of the game. Can we afford such an unholy liaison between civilisations?

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad wrote in his latest book, A New Deal For Asia: "Needless to say, we cannot afford a world buffeted by a clash of civilisations. Rather we should think about how civilisations can learn and adopt the good values of each other, and identify areas of similarity rather than potential conflict."

The differences between civilisations are aplenty. But their similarities too are abundant. No man is an island, no civilisation is irrelevant. Thus, we must find ways to not only tolerate differences, but also thrive on similarities.

Muslims for example have to constantly explain and demonstrate that Islam is not merely a religion with a set of rites and rituals, but rather a code of practice that governs all facets of life.

Therefore, whilst the ongoing quest of Muslims for an authentic way of life makes the question of Islamic revivalism relevant, non-Muslims may see this as a threat to their existence and survival.

The apprehension about Islamic revivalism may in part be due to the media portrayal of Muslims as violent, militant, archaic and retrogressive. This myth has to be debunked.

The problem of power differentials between countries, regional blocs and civilisations too, has to be addressed.

Meaningful dialogue will not happen as long as the civic culture of dialogue is cast aside and the culture of gunboat diplomacy allowed to prevail.

Thus, the commitment to peace, accommodation and tolerance of political leaders in the international community is necessary, if dialogues are not to be reduced to insignificant exercises.

Despite globalisation and the breaking down of barriers, every sovereign nation should have the right to choose its own political and administrative system, and not forced to adopt a paradigm that is alien and, perhaps, counter-productive to its people.

A solution to religious intolerance is economic reform. Muslim countries are currently plagued with economic dependency syndrome that makes global co-operation almost impossible.

The inequity in wealth distribution and resource allocation places them at a greater disadvantage. These issues must be looked at before any civilisational dialogue can be meaningful.

The pluralistic nature of the modern world requires an intensified effort to develop appropriate educational policies and strategies.

In many parts of the world, there is a need to educate educators on the diversity of religious traditions, ethnic groups and relevant languages.

Academic co-operation and exchange are needed in various disciplines. Only a handful of students from the West travel to the East. Such a move has to be extensively promoted as it can help the visitors understand, while observing first-hand, the practices and life of the people of the host countries.

Both the Muslim and non-Muslim communities must also demand for an enhanced level of transparency, accountability and awareness in news reports, in order to eradicate prejudices, degrading stereotypes, and religiously-determined categorisations.

Greater effort must be made to foster mutual respect. There must be a respite from the crude polemics of East versus West, or North versus South, by acknowledging that cultural diversity is a reality.

The ethical approach, such as the imperative of environmental issues, may be used as common ground for Muslim and non-Muslim co-operation.

True, there is now probably enhanced understanding among Muslims and non-Muslims of each other's nature. But mere understanding is not enough.

It must move beyond that. In this respect, upon the proposal made by the world Muslim community late last year, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously agreed to designate 2001 the "Year of Dialogue Among Civilisations".

As they prepare for dialogues with others, Muslims must also begin to put their house in order. Muslims in Malaysia, too, are not exempted.

There is something to be learnt from the movement towards dialogue. It is also time to realise that Islam is not a religion of talking per se as many in this country would think; it also enjoins listening.

Thus, Muslims in Malaysia need to engage in more dialogues rather than debates. Debates have only one objective, namely to pulverise one's opponent.

Debates do not aim to seek the truth, but rather to pursue victory at any cost, and then hopefully bask in glory.

In many instances debates, especially religious ones, have been shown to be counter-productive. They may also be intentionally triggered in order to spice up otherwise mundane issues.

Dialogues, rather than debates, should be the Muslim way of addressing differences. While engaging in dialogues, whether among themselves, or

with non-Muslims, Muslims have to subscribe to Allah's command: "Invite all to the way of the Lord with beautiful preaching and argue with them in the ways that are best and most gracious."