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Bosnia-Herzegovina needs funds for reconstruction

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A CERTAIN affinity exists between Malaysia and Bosnia-Herzegovina. That affinity is today manifested in many ways - the building of a school, the reconstruction of a mosque that is almost 500 years old, the building of roads and bridges, the creation of jobs, and the involvement of its police and armed forces personnel under the United Nations flag.

Blatant "ethnic cleansing" in the early 1990s saw hundreds of thousands of Bosnians, mostly Muslims, slaughtered while the world's powerful nations stood in silence. Powered by the machine-guns and armoury of the former Yugoslav army, Serbian militia massacred Bosnians in a crime that has yet to see justice.

Intervention only came much later, which resulted in the break-up of Yugoslavia and the creation of new republics.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is one of them, and its survival would largely depend on how its people could forgive and forget the crimes they committed against each other.

Malaysia's affinity with Bosnia-Herzegovina was triggered by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who gave the genocide a high profile with his consistent and frequent criticisms of the slaughter.

Halfway round the globe, a lone voice in Asia kept hitting out at the mindless killings, torture and massive destruction.

With every opportunity he had, Dr Mahathir lamented at the lack of intervention from the world's superpowers. Since the superpowers had little or no vested interest in the country, action came very late. The war finally ended in 1995, but the loss of lives, properties and dignity were too much to bear.

Dr Mahathir's vocal support culminated in a visit to Sarajevo in 1996, where he was conferred the country's highest award, the Dragon of Bosnia Award. The award is conferred to foreign heads of governments for "strengthening friendly relationships" between Bosnia-Herzegovina and other countries.

On that trip, the Prime Minister made courtesy calls on Bosnian leaders, visited a mosque damaged by repeated mortar shellings, a library that was burnt down and the books completely destroyed, a school for young children and a graveyard known as the Cemetery of the Martyrs.

On Wednesday, Dr Mahathir made a return visit to Sarajevo to renew his friendship with the republic.

"A visit of two old friends," said Bosnian Prime Minister Edhem Bicakcic when describing the stopover.

Accompanied by his wife, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Dr Mahathir, staying only for half a day, spent quality time by visiting an old mosque and a school, gave a lecture at the University of Sarajevo, and were interviewed by the national television station and a newspaper.

Things have changed considerably in Sarajevo. The roads are busy, the people can walk about with much less fear of snipers lurking in some dark corners, the old city is bustling with social and economic activities, the nightclubs echo with music and taxis are doing roaring business. But the country's woes are far from over.

Bosnia-Herzegovina is in dire need of foreign investments. Investments are welcomed in infrastructural projects, education, telecommunications, housing and job-creating enterprises. One needs only to take a short ride through the city to see that much work is needed to restore its beauty and

glory.

Economic growth has been encouraging in the last four years. In fact, the average gross domestic product in the last four years was 21 per cent, Bicakcic said, but the Government was grappling with mounting unemployment. The national treasury is under a lot of stress as it also supports 100,000 disabled war veterans and their families.

Bicakcic estimated his country needs more than DM3 billion (RM5.1 billion) for reconstruction purposes, hoping that neighbouring European countries would participate in the on-going privatisation projects. He is also hopeful that West Asian countries would join the rebuilding exercise.

The Bosnian leadership was quick to point out that there was much to learn from the way Malaysia, through the policies initiated by Dr Mahathir, handled the economic crisis after the currency attack of 1997. Bicakcic, who said Dr Mahathir's book, *A New Deal for Asia*, had been translated into the Bosnian language, was sure that the Malaysian experience could help his country face the future with more confidence.

But this will largely depend on the country's domestic harmony. The animosity between Bosnians and Serbs may have been buried temporarily but the ghost may still haunt the living. Economic prosperity, it becomes clear, would remain only if the ruling coalition Government could sustain their political will and push for a more enduring ethnic relationship.

The Bosnian leadership must come to grips with this, rather than allow itself be caught in inter and intra-party rivalries. The Stranka Demokratske Akcije, the main coalition party, hinted at attempts to "divide and rule" the main political players in the country.

It is not clear who is behind the "divide and rule" game plan, but some fingers are pointing at external elements bent on wanting to see a weak Bosnia-Herzegovina. If this is not curbed, said the party's secretary-general, Mirsad Ceman, the country's future would hang in the balance.

There has also been criticisms against the hidden agenda of powerful entities in the Balkan conflict. A strong and progressive Muslim nation at the heart of Europe would be a sore thumb to many.

Malaysia's support of the Bosnian republic has not wavered. During his meeting with President Alija Izetbegovic, Dr Mahathir handed over a cheque of DM200,000 as part of the Government's pledge to help the rebuilding of Bosnia-Herzegovina. This time, the funds are meant to help finance some of the needs of the displaced persons in the country.

Dr Mahathir also handed over a letter of donation from the people of Malaysia amounting to US\$67,700 (RM257,260) for the reconstruction of Bey Mosque, a mosque built in the 16th century. The money came from the Barisan Bertindak Bosnia, a non-governmental organisation led by the country's leading newspapers, the Majlis Belia Malaysia and other associations.

It is recalled that the BBB had handed over US\$782,013 to the Government of Bosnia-Herzegovina in 1994 to help fund educational, health and social programmes. The money was handed through the then Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi in New York. The BBB, taking the cue from the Prime Minister's stand on the issue, was largely responsible for creating a high level of awareness of the Bosnian problem with its nationwide rallies and RM1 campaign.

Dr Mahathir's visit to Sarajevo serves as a reminder to Malaysians. His lecture at the University of Sarajevo stressed the need for ethnic and religious tolerance, a matter of common and equal concern in Bosnia-Herzegovina and Malaysia. For Bosnia, this is a challenge the country must overcome, a failure of which can lead to more bloodshed and wanton destruction.

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