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Islamic unity should begin at home

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NOW and then, certain Muslim leaders will come up with a good idea of how to bridge the divide among followers of the Islamic faith.

What the Saudi Arabian Minister on Haj Affairs Dr Iyad Ameen proposed during the recent First Conference on Haj Guidance here in Kuala Lumpur is an example.

He said the Saudi Government will introduce a new settlement system for pilgrims in the coming Haj season.

If previously pilgrims were settled according to their country of origin, this time around, Dr Iyad proposed, pilgrims from different nations will be grouped together and will perform the Haj together.

The rationale, according to Dr Iyad, is to allow these pilgrims from different countries to mingle freely, which in turn will foster closer ties and exchanges of culture.

The idea sounds good and should be supported by Muslims the world over. They should strive to achieve these goals.

Yet, such proposals sound hollow if one were to reflect on the deep rift in the Muslim world.

Forget about Muslims from other parts of the world and confine the assessment to the Arab countries alone.

The sanctions against Iraq stand as a reflection of how divided the Muslims in West Asia are and the perpetrators are not confined to the US and Britain.

In the case of the United Nations' decade-old sanctions on Iraq, the US and Britain have been of late the main proponents of not lifting the embargo.

However, following the arrival of recent flights-of-mercy missions from Russia and France, the media in Arab nations have started to pressure their Governments to do likewise.

The Jordanian Government decided to act and last week broke the no-fly zone into Iraq, making it the first Arab country to emulate the efforts of Russia and France.

While these efforts are going on, the media in a few Arab countries are singing a different tune - for the sanctions to continue.

Of course, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein is no angel but to want the sanctions to continue at the expense of the lives of innocent Iraqi children is unacceptable.

When the refusal to lift sanctions came from Washington and London, it was understandable. It was also quite understandable when the opposition came from Kuwait, the nation that was invaded by Iraq.

But to come from the Arabs is unpalatable.

Yet, that is the reality of West Asian politics in which tribalism, supposed to have been diluted by the passage of time since the advent of Islam, is very much alive.

If it is not tribalism, then it has to be the political realities of which almost all Arab nations are aware of - toe the American line or be punished.

While trying to deal with the plight of the Iraqis, the recent murder of Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and West Bank by Israeli soldiers should further remind the Arabs of what they have become.

But such divisions among the Muslims is not confined to the Arabs. Back home, the division among the Malay Muslims is just as real.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on his part, has painted a gloomy picture of the Muslim divide.

"After 1,400 years, they clearly have failed to understand their really simple religion, the religion that is not to be a burden to them.

"And so, they will continue to argue and to debate and to disagree on the teachings of their religion, and in disagreeing they will fight and kill each other, subconsciously perhaps doing the work of their detractors and enemies," he said in his speech at the Muslim College in London on Tuesday.

Such are the circumstances shrouding the Muslims, Malays in Malaysia included, that every time there is talk of bridging the divide, they react with cynicism.

And the cynicism is not shown to onlookers but to participants or those who can make a difference.

One example is how cold water was poured over the proposed Malay Council which was supposed to have acted as a forum for the community to discuss their interests and direction.

The council, an idea from Minister in Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Rais Yatim, was snubbed by Pas president Datuk Fadzil Noor who described it as a "trick" by Umno to pursue its political ends.

Even if the accusations made by Fadzil were true, the next question is where does this leave the Malay Muslim community in this country?

If a proposal comes from Pas, Umno will treat it as the opposition's agenda for political gain and if the latter were to propose it, as it did, the former will make a similar accusation.

The process of accusations and counter-accusations will go on forever.

Now, back to the proposal by Saudi's Dr Iyad of not segregating the pilgrims by nations any more. Chances are, he will face problems with pilgrims from Malaysia. Based on the bits and pieces gathered from those who performed their haj last season, some Malays decided to put up the flags and symbols of their party they support back home.

Such behaviour will definitely beat the purpose of making the pilgrimage a platform for unity and brotherhood.

It looks like these Malays are going to be all right with the idea to foster closer ties with Muslims from other nations, but not with their fellow Malays.

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