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OIC must cut from the rhetoric to real world

Zainon Ahmad

IT MAY be described as yet another caucus of Islamic countries. The 27th meeting of Islamic foreign ministers may be also described as the first meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Conference in the new millennium - a millennium foreseen as fraught with challenges for the 31-year old organisation.

But the meeting is more than just another meeting of the OIC, its members would probably assert publicly.

To them it is a more successful meeting than the previous one. Pressed further, they would also probably admit that every meeting is more successful than the preceding one.

Indeed, cynicism aside and considering the babel of countries that makes up the OIC membership, that it continues to exist at all and continues to meet regularly is already a major success.

Political and ideological forces are forever threatening to break up the organisation but arguments about the need to preserve the ummah after the eclipse of the caliphate in 1924, always persuade the Muslim nations against making hasty decisions.

So despite the strengthening of the nation states, considered by some as against Islam, the existence of the OIC preserves the Muslim ummah or the world Muslim community. Thus, the extreme care that is taken to ensure that issues sensitive to some members are not tabled for discussions in OIC fora.

Thus, year in and year out, most of the resolutions that are passed are old and emotional ones, issues such as al-Quds, guaranteed to foster unity but without offending any member's sensitivities.

Understandably, much of the debate during the meetings, including those at the just concluded one, has always been heavy on inspirational rhetoric but light on specifics.

But significantly, three decades after the OIC's birth, many delegates are realising that the OIC cannot languish in inactivity forever. Also, if the OIC is to be relevant in the 21st century it must be allowed to finally evolve into an effective organisation to solve problems of the ummah.

They are saying that the days of harping on the same old resolutions, irrelevant to the progress of the community, should end. The war between Kuwait and Iraq was over a year ago and there should be no more resolutions on it.

In the past resolutions centred on dozens of issues from poverty to minorities and volumes of reports were produced but nobody read them - an indication of ineffectiveness. This must end.

Meanwhile, Iraq, a member, is still suffering under sanctions imposed by the United Nations almost a decade after its invasion of Kuwait. There was hope early during the meeting that members would agree to call on the UN to lift the sanctions.

Somalia, a member, is still disunited under several warlords and its people have been suffering for about a decade now. The civil war in Afghanistan continues to destroy the country and cause untold suffering to the people.

Factions in the two countries continue to fight using weapons supplied by others, including some member states. Elsewhere, Muslim minorities - for example the Moros in the Philippines and the Chechens in Russia - are

suffering as a result of their faith.

And a new and more threatening problem is looming - globalisation. Being developing and under-developed countries, they are going to be marginalised and even badly trodden upon by the industrialised countries if they are not properly prepared and united.

Thus, some of these more discerning members say that the time has come for the bonding to be tested with some bold decisions to counter the new challenges ranged against Islam and the unity of the ummah.

ONE of them is Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad. His opening speech stressed unity and the need to strengthen the bonding among members. For the ummah to be strong, members must quickly resolve the petty conflicts among them.

He opened the meeting on Tuesday with a stark warning that Islamic states could end up as "banana republics" unless they end their squabbles and unite and acquire skills to meet the challenges of globalisation and the information revolution.

"The solution is with us," he said. "We can choose to carry on with our petty rivalries or we can together or even separately turn to face the real threat to Islam."

Others like outgoing secretary-general Dr Azeddine Laraki said that the coming together of countries under the OIC banner due to a shared religion needs to be further strengthened by other common interests such as trade and the economy.

A few said the much vaunted idea of an Islamic common market is still very much a dream and regretted that trade between the 56 members currently accounted for less than 10 per cent of total world trade due to tariff barriers between them.

Laraki disagreed with the suggestion that the OIC is ineffective saying: "The conference allows ministers and heads of member states to exchange views bilaterally on the sides of the meetings.

"This has helped us to overcome many problems which would have otherwise erupted."

But he admitted that the OIC was constrained by its constitution and lack of resources.

Others argue that had the constitution allowed the OIC more power from the beginning, many countries would not have joined.

The constitution, Laraki said, does not allow, for instance, the OIC to play the same role as the United Nations where peacekeeping troops could be sent to trouble spots. And resolutions are not binding on member states.

And far more serious, the constitution even makes it mandatory for members to pay their dues. Laraki said the annual budget of US\$11 million (RM41.80 million) is hardly sufficient to run the organisation especially when slightly less than half the amount is paid up by members.

"If members want to see the organisation being slightly more effective they should pay up," remarked Laraki. The choice of his successor ruffled some feathers.

THERE were high hopes that the 27th meeting of OIC foreign ministers, especially when it is the first meeting of the organisation in the new millennium, would be much different from the others. Many members, including Malaysia thought so.

At the end of his speech when opening the meeting, Dr Mahathir said: "I dare hope that this meeting of foreign ministers of the OIC countries will recognise the danger and the challenges posed by globalisation, and recognising them, take the first step towards reducing the divisions between us and focusing our attention on the acquisition of knowledge to combat the use of Information Technology to destroy our values, our faith

and the remains of our civilisation."

Unfortunately not many heard him. Evidently, they chose to ignore the sentiments he expressed.

Still, some credit must go to Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, as chairman, for his valiant efforts to guide the meeting towards achieving some of the objective contained in the Prime Minister's speech.

Thus, his despair was understandable when the meeting failed to support a plea by Iraq to lift the economic sanctions against it. Instead, a toughly worded communique called on Iraq "not to again use military force or any other force in an aggressive or provocative manner to threaten its neighbours or UN operations in Iraq."

"It is sad to see that Muslims themselves knowingly allow the suffering of Muslim brothers, sisters and children to persist, by lending their consent not to lift sanctions imposed on Iraq," said Syed Hamid in his closing speech.

Somehow the resolution on supporting the State of Palestine upon its proclamation and that Jerusalem should be its capital was adopted by the meeting.

At the beginning of the meeting many delegates supported Syed Hamid's call that future meetings of the OIC must strike out from the organisation's agenda all those items which are outdated, irrelevant, one-sided or which no longer reflect the current situation. InshaAllah.

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