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OIC to discuss more than 80 items at meet

Zainul Arifin in Doha

DOHA, Sun: The leaders of Islamic nations gathered in the capital of this gas-rich Emirate with rock-throwing Palestinian youth on their minds.

There are of course a plethora of issues to be discussed, but the events in recent weeks in relation to the Palestine-Israel conflict dominate.

On the agenda are more than 80 items, ranging from challenges to the Islamic brotherhood, the plight of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the territorial dispute in Kashmir to the need to promote technological advancement among Muslims.

There has been a growing sense of collective outrage as images of the Intifada are flashed almost hourly over television. With that serving as the backdrop for the Nineth Islamic Summit Conference, the 56-member nations are preparing to come up with a strong unified stand against Israeli atrocities.

The leaders, representing about a billion people, will decide on an a draft resolution forwarded by their foreign ministers who had met earlier. It will not only condemn the Israeli action as war crimes and crimes against humanity, but also request or "invite" members to cut ties with the Jewish state.

The word "invite" was a softening of the initial stance of most members to end relations with Israel. Iraq had even called for a jihad, or holy war.

Although just as horrified by the death toll as the other members, Egypt and Jordan - which maintain diplomatic ties with Israel and are deeply involved in the US-brokered West Asian peace process - have tempered the proposed resolution.

The two countries said their support for their Palestinian brothers remains unwavering, but cutting ties with Israel will not serve the cause well.

The leaders are expected to urge Washington, generally seen as a strong backer of Tel Aviv, to take a "humanitarian and honest stance".

"All Muslim countries are outraged about the support of Americans for Israel," Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi said on Saturday. "They have shown they are not neutral, and they have always been supporting Israelis against Palestinians."

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, when addressing the summit today on behalf of Asian members, called on Muslim nations to stay united and not be sidetracked by petty bickering. This is critical to the cause of the Palestinians who have "fought and died undeniably in defence of Islam".

Sadly, Muslim countries, representing more than a third of the membership of the United Nations, watch helplessly as Israel continues with impunity and arrogance to kill innocent Palestinians, he said.

"Such is the dire state of Muslim countries that we are unable to respond effectively to the challenge posed by the cowardly acts of Israel. Not only are the Palestinians under assault, but also Muslim honour and unity," Dr Mahathir said in his speech.

It calls for unity and solidarity within the Ummah, he added.

"What is happening to the Palestinians could obviously happen to us also. Indeed in Yugoslavia and Chechnya, and elsewhere, it is happening. Must we wait until all of us are ground into the ground before we appreciate the need to act?"

The Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) must ensure that its voice is heard, and members should act firmly to support and assist the Palestinian leadership.

"Let us therefore not bicker among ourselves, but instead approach it with a collective heart and mind... Let us shame those who loudly condemn imaginary oppression and yet do nothing when blatant violations of human rights take place before their very eyes," the Prime Minister said.

Not all member states of the OIC are represented here, however. Libya is boycotting the summit as it feels that it will not achieve much, while Bahrain is sending a low-level official due to existing border disputes with Qatar.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, fresh from his visit to the United Nations, will understandably take centre stage. He is expected to push for greater commitment from OIC members to the cause of his people.

The summit, held every three years, was almost eclipsed by a boycott threat from several countries, including Saudi Arabia and Iran, for what their heads of state felt was insensitivity on the part of Qatar to allow an Israeli trade office to remain open here.

Qatar relented at the last minute and closed the office, then underlined its sympathy with the Palestinians by funding an international human rights mission to look into the atrocities committed against them.

Meanwhile on the sidelines of the meeting, efforts are being made to unite once-bitter enemies Iraq and Iran. In fact, Iran indicated that it wants the decade-old sanctions against the country lifted immediately.

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