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Palestine issue continues to dominate OIC meet

Zainul Arifin in Doha

DOHA, Tues: The Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) was an idea bandied about in the 1960s, but formalised almost immediately following the attack on the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem - Islam's third holiest site - in 1969.

The first meeting that year was held in Rabbat and was attended by 26 nations. From then till now, every three years at the summits the issue of Palestine dominates.

This year's meeting has a modern-day version of David versus Goliath - stone-throwing youth against the might of Israeli guns - serving as the backdrop.

The intifada, in its seventh week now, has claimed more than 200 lives - mostly Palestinians and Arabs.

That the 9th OIC summit which ended on Monday would condemn Israel was expected, but some strong words and radical proposal suggest that the anger at the atrocities committed against the Palestinians is perhaps at its highest in recent times.

Iraq and Sudan, for example, want to wage a holy war against Israel.

Most countries called for those with ties to the Jewish state to cut them, while others like Egypt still want to retain their diplomatic links in the hope that it will somehow further the peace process.

Yet others like Turkey want to retain its military ties.

Save for their collective outrage over recent events in Israel-occupied Palestine, the disparate views expressed at the two-day meet suggested that the 56-member nations were still divided over how they could mobilise their collective anger into something fruitful.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, when speaking at the opening of the summit, said: "Muslim countries are generally caught in their own quagmire of abject poverty and internal violence... There are more intra-Muslim conflicts within Muslim countries and between Muslim countries than there are between Muslims and their detractors."

Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia surprised the meeting when it proposed that OIC members sever diplomatic ties with the US should the latter move its embassy to Jerusalem.

Israel unilaterally declared the city - holy to Muslims, Jews and Christians - as its "eternal and indivisible capital" shortly after seizing it from Jordan in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war.

In recent years, the US Congress has recognised Israel's claim and Washington has been considering moving its embassy there.

Surprise, because Saudi Arabia is one of the US' major allies in West Asia. American jets patrolling Iraq continue to operate from a Saudi air base.

At the end of the summit, the leaders resolved that the aggression in Jerusalem "is a premeditated act as part of a consistent Israeli policy to impose the status quo and Judaize the holy city".

"I think we can make strong statements, but people are waiting for us to do something that reflects the contents of the statements.

"That is a proposal that can be implemented, provided all the Islamic countries agree. It will mean a lot of disruptions, of course, but that will show our determination to see that the Palestinian problems are resolved," Dr Mahathir told journalists on Monday before leaving for Brunei for the Asia Pacific Economic Cooperation forum.

Asked whether such a call was merely symbolic and would not achieve anything much, he said: "I think there is a possibility that it will not just be symbolic.

"People can be driven to the end... to the wall and they have to turn around and do something about it. At this moment, we see children being killed simply because they threw stones. I think there is a limit to all these things."

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, who came to the meeting direct from a rather unsuccessful trip to Washington and the United Nations in New York, is adamant to keep up the fight for a Palestine nation.

He even brought along three Palestian Christian religious leaders to underline the fact that the Palestinian issue is not purely a Muslim issue.

Arafat was trying to have a peacekeeping mission sent to Israel-occupied Palestine, but the idea was opposed by the US.

In this respect, at the Doha summit, Qatar's Emir Sheikh Hamad Al Thani called on Muslim nations to send a delegation of foreign ministers to press the UN Security Council to take immediate steps to halt Israel's aggression and to provide the "necessary international protection for the Palestinian people".

The Summit also urged member countries to break off diplomatic ties with Israel. Some 20 members have ties with the Jewish state.

It is also calling on the US to be even-handed in dealing with Israel-related issues, which thus far it has not. Washington is generally seen to be unquestioning in its support of Tel Aviv.

At the same time, the Summit made clear that it deplored all forms of terrorism from whatever source.

But there was a need to "distinguish between terrorism and peoples' struggle and liberation".

There must have been some other matters discussed at the Summit, but it did not seem that way to observers.

The issue of Palestine will likely continue to demand much attention from Muslim nations in the years ahead, especially following the more brazen attitude of Israel in recent days.

It is expected to be high up on the agenda again at the OIC's 10th summit, scheduled to be held in Kuala Lumpur in 2003.

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