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## Hopes for better ties

US President George W. Bush's telephone call to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Monday to thank Malaysia for its support of America's effort to combat terrorism could herald the dawn of warmer bilateral ties which have been prickly in recent years.

Both leaders will discuss global terrorism when they meet during the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation forum meeting scheduled for Oct 20 and 21 in Shanghai. That Bush sought out Dr Mahathir for talks on the issue is a recognition that Malaysia can make a contribution, given its own experience in dealing with terrorism and its standing in the Islamic world. The meeting will give the two men an opportunity to know each other and also share their views and concerns about other developments, including the world economy.

The Sept 11 terrorist attacks on New York and Washington have dealt a serious blow to the US economy which was teetering on the edge of recession even before then. The cold, which many countries caught earlier, may turn into pneumonia. We are naturally concerned.

Malaysia's experience in crushing the Communist terrorist insurgency in the early years and the recent measures taken to check the threat posed by militants are useful lessons that we can share with the US. Bush's reiteration that action mobilised against terrorism is not a war against Islam has set a positive tone.

Close ties between Kuala Lumpur and Washington are important to our development and well-being. Some 20 per cent of our exports go to the United States which is Malaysia's largest trading partner. In turn, Malaysia is America's 12th largest customer in terms of imports. American foreign direct investments in Malaysia totalled about US\$5 billion between 1995 and 2000. It is hardly surprising then that businessmen and those who have special interests in Malaysia want to see better ties, and they have been taking their own initiatives to enhance them.

Thousands of Malaysian students are pursuing higher education in the US and many have graduated from American universities and colleges. We enjoy close relations in the area of defence and security. However, Malaysia has always spoken its mind on matters affecting its interests. It will not brook any attempt by any country to interfere in its domestic affairs.

In the international arena, we have been steadfast in championing the cause of the poor and impoverished countries. We have criticised and will continue to criticise injustices perpetuated against our fellow human beings everywhere. We were in the forefront in the fight against apartheid. We share in the pains of the Palestinians and the Iraqis who are suffering from economic sanctions.

Relations between Malaysia and the US have always been strong in the area of trade and investment, but on the political front, the going was bumpy during former US President Bill Clinton's term. Various quarters including political parties and non-governmental organisations have blamed the US for meddling in Malaysia's internal affairs. Former US Vice-President Al Gore's call to Malaysians to take to the street was the last straw. Last year, Malaysia protested to the US for making statements questioning the integrity of Malaysia's judiciary. Following changes to Washington's administration earlier this year, however, Dr Mahathir had expressed hopes for improving ties. Indeed, we should look forward and build our relations on the basis of two equal and sovereign nations.

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