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Malaysia-US ties are warming up (HL)

Hardev Kaur; Rupa Damodaran in Shanghai

THERE is a clear warming of relations between Malaysia and the United States in recent weeks, culminating in the face-to-face meeting between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and US President George W. Bush yesterday.

Dr Mahathir described the 30-minute meeting as good and said Bush had promised to strengthen relations with Malaysia.

He said Bush largely accepted the fact that Malaysia and the US might differ on certain issues but saw eye-to-eye on the important issue of terrorism.

The two stressed the need to revive the world economy, with Bush emphasising that without restoring world trade, countries would not be able to develop.

This was their first meeting, but both leaders have exchanged views on the telephone following the Sept 11 attacks on New York and Washington.

Dr Mahathir had also written a letter to the President, expressing his views on tackling terrorism. Bush thanked the Prime Minister for Malaysia's support against terrorism and explained the need to launch the military action in Afghanistan.

"I explained our support (against terrorism) and why we are unable to support the operations against Afghanistan," Dr Mahathir said.

Bush, according to Dr Mahathir, indicated that Malaysia has a role to play in the Islamic world.

However, he drew Bush's attention to the anger and frustration in the Muslim world, which the latter understood and appreciated.

In this context, Dr Mahathir also explained to Bush the need to remove the root causes of terrorism, singling out the Palestinian problem as the main cause.

Bush told the Prime Minister that he has been urging them to settle the conflict and accepts that there should be a Palestinian state and a Jewish state, Israel. This is something that the Palestinians must accept.

Bush explained that each time he tried to get them together someone goes in and spites the whole thing by assassinating or killing someone or exploding a bomb.

The President said he had taken interest in the Middle East issues and wanted to try and resolve it on the basis of recognition of the Palestinian right to a Palestinian state and the right of the Jews to a Jewish state.

Both leaders agreed that the Palestinian conflict must be resolved.

Dr Mahathir said this is something that Malaysia agrees with, "but I don't think it can be resolved overnight".

He said the resolution of the problem will reduce the killing and the frustration and anger in the Muslim world.

Dr Mahathir said he also explained how Malaysia dealt with its communist insurgency and solved the problem of dissatisfaction on the part of the Chinese population in Malaysia.

The Government involved the Chinese community in public administration and offered citizenship. Because of that, support for terrorism was reduced and stopped.

"By the same token, we believe that solving the causes of terrorist acts will help towards eliminating the danger."

The Prime Minister said he also touched on Malaysia's "prosper thy

neighbour" policy.

He said Malaysia worked with Vietnam to restore its economy and was able to repatriate the 10,000 Vietnamese refugees in Malaysia following the end of the Vietnam war.

Bush also sought Dr Mahathir's opinion on the situation in Indonesia, to which the Prime Minister stressed the need to support President Megawati Sukarnoputri because Indonesia needs a strong and credible government.

He said Malaysia would like to see the situation in the republic settled. There will be a fallout when they are not well and the tendency is for the Indonesians to emigrate to Malaysia, he added.

He said the President understood Malaysia's concern since the US faced a similar problem of illegal immigration from Mexico.

Both countries agreed to improve co-operation in several fields, including combating dadah smuggling.

Bush's parting words were that Malaysia and the US should strengthen their relations.

Dr Mahathir also had bilateral meetings with Chinese President Jiang Zemin, Russian President Vladimir Putin and Mexican President Vicente Fox.

He delivered a keynote address on Globalisation with Common Development at the Apec CEO Summit which ended yesterday and together with other leaders attended a dialogue with members of the Apec Business Advisory Council.

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