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Sending the wrong signals

THE call by the Malaysian Ulama Association to boycott US goods and services for its bombing of Afghanistan is counter-productive and naive. It will also send the wrong message to American investors at a time when there is intense international competition for foreign funds.

Despite Malaysia's differences with the US over Afghanistan, there must continue to be a policy of constructive engagement to our mutual benefit. We cannot let emotion and anger overwhelm us to the point that we become irrational.

In urging the ulama not to be emotional, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad cited the example of US-made Boeing planes being used to fly Malaysian pilgrims to Mecca. Shall we then stop using these planes? What about the thousands of Malaysians studying in American colleges and universities? Shall we get them to return home?

In any case, PUM has no locus standi when it comes to issuing fatwa (Islamic ruling). As Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi says, only the Government's Fatwa council has the right to issue such a ruling. And only it can make it stick.

The self-proclaimed ulama should ponder the consequences of a boycott because it could backfire on the country. Malaysians are against the US bombing which has killed or injured many innocent civilians. The Government has on repeated occasions expressed its dismay at the US military campaign in Afghanistan. However, Malaysia has to be practical. It has to accept the harsh reality that the US is a military and economic superpower and that Malaysia needs American investment and technology. It is also a large market for our electronic and semiconductor exports.

Assuming that the country does begin boycotting American-made goods and services. What then? What if the US retaliates by not taking Malaysian-made goods and American companies refrain from investing in Malaysia? This will affect our export-based industries and jeopardise many jobs. Such a development would have a negative impact on our economy in the best of times. In the present environment, this can have disastrous consequences.

Malaysia can register its disapproval of US military action in Afghanistan in other ways. A boycott does no one any good.

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