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US must be even-handed

THE United States has rightly criticised the Israeli invasion of the West Bank and demanded its withdrawal. This is the only way to check the escalating violence. Washington's sternest rebuke yet of its close ally comes at a time when good sense and sensibility are needed to assuage the frustration and anger arising from injustices suffered by the Palestinians. The year-long intifada in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has left more than 900 dead, of which more than three-quarters are Palestinians.

Regrettably, Israel has defied US President George W. Bush's call, saying it will not withdraw until the Palestinian Authority has arrested those suspected of killing Israeli Tourism Minister Rehavam Zeevi and handed them over. An eye for an eye only exacerbates the situation.

Israel's partial re-occupation of six Palestinian towns and its intransigence has scuttled US efforts to calm the uprising and allow it to wage its anti-terror campaign in Afghanistan with solid Arab backing. The re-ignition of tension in the region has to be resolved, and quickly too, as this is linked to the US' war on terror.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in his meeting with Bush in Shanghai recently, had advised the US President of the need to resolve the Palestinian problem - the main cause of terrorism - as this is the only way to alleviate the frustration and anger in the Islamic heartland. While it is heartening to note that Bush is personally committed to settling the conflict and recognising the setting up of a Palestinian State, this has to be translated into reality.

If this is not put into motion speedily, peace in the troubled land will remain elusive and terrorism will continue to rear its head. In the face of such a crisis, the US must be even-handed in its handling of the conflict. This must be seen to be translated on the ground. It must nudge the Israelis to move forward, failing which it may have to consider stronger measures. Diplomacy and constructive engagement must be steered towards settling the root cause of the problem. Lip service will not do.

This is indeed a Herculean task, especially when bitterness runs deep on both sides, but a fair and amicable settlement has to be found. Otherwise, there will be no lasting peace in the world. The bombs and missiles over Afghanistan and the occupation of Palestinian land will not stop the suicide squads.

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