

'Muslim world must

Nst 18 APR 2002

Dr Mahathir's frank views on Islamic unity,

From Ahmad A. Talib
in Rabat, Morocco

A MEETING with Malaysian students late into the night capped Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's second of his four-day stay here, a function which he had to miss when it was held earlier in the evening.

The Prime Minister had an audience with the Moroccan King, Mohammed VI, in Marrakesh, and this had kept him away from the meeting with the students.

Entrepreneur Development Minister Datuk Seri Mohamed Nazri Abdul Aziz and Family and Women Development Minister Datuk Shahrizat Abdul Jalil, were then assigned to meet the students as replacement speakers.

But Dr Mahathir, who insisted on not disappointing the students, met them after attending the dinner hosted by his Moroccan counterpart Ahderrahmane Youssoufi, at his residence. Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, and other dignitaries, were also guests at the dinner.

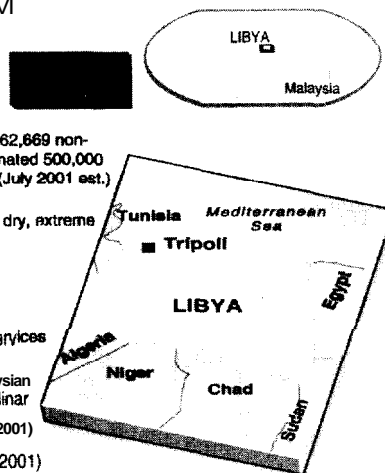
Happy though he was over the encounter with the students, Dr Mahathir's earlier dialogue with Moroccan intellectuals, MPs and think-tank was far more engaging. After delivering his address titled *Enhancing the image of Islam*, the Prime Minister was flooded with questions from the floor. (See **Page 8 for excerpts of his speech.**)

In his speech, Dr Mahathir argued that bravery alone would not necessarily enhance the image of

QUICKTAKE

PM VISITS LIBYA FROM APRIL 18 - 19

Land Area	1,759,540 sq km
Capital	Tripoli
Population	5,240,599, note: includes 662,669 non-nationals, of whom an estimated 500,000 or more are Africans living in Libya (July 2001 est.)
Climate	Mediterranean along coast; dry, extreme desert interior
Official Language	Arabic
Religion	Islam
Economy	Agriculture, industry and services
Currency & Exchange rate	Libyan dinar (LYD) 1 Malaysian Ringgit = 0.35323 Libyan dinar
Total exports to Malaysia	RM 4.9 million (2001)
Total imports from Malaysia	RM 14.7 million (2001)



Islam. In fact, lashing out blindly in anger would not help to glorify Muslim civilisation; it's not even Islamic, he remarked.

The Prime Minister's frank views triggered many questions, with the enquirers agreeing generally with his perspectives on how Islam's image could be further promoted.

Malaysia, they chorused, was the model Islamic nation that ought to be studied and copied. Academician Syed Khan Al Hassan, the first to offer his comments during the ensuing dialogue, suggested that there should be more student exchanges between the two countries.

The next speaker wanted to know whether Dr Mahathir's ideas on promoting the interest of the *ummah* could be implemented, sug-

gesting that it would be difficult if not impossible to turn ideas into action. "How could the Islamic world take your words and ideas and turn them into action?" the Prime Minister was asked.

Dr Mahathir's response was short and straight to the point. "It all depends whether the Muslim world has the will to make decisions. Until today we've not been able to collectively agree to implement an earlier suggestion of the Islamic dinar even though the mechanisms have been put in place. If this cannot be done on a large scale, perhaps we can do it on bilateral terms initially," he said.

A Moroccan MP, in a supplementary question, asked whether Dr Mahathir implied that the Islamic

have the will'

civilisation impress Moroccans

world should emulate the European Union which introduced the euro. The Prime Minister said this need not be so, but if Islamic countries were to return to the fundamentals of the religion such as brotherhood of the ummah, "then we can achieve beyond form and go into substance".

But he feared that the disunity in the Islamic world has not helped put an end to the misery of the Palestinians. The Islamic world, too, must look at its problems realistically as only after this could the problems be overcome.

Dr Mahathir said: "The Malaysian stand on the Palestinian issue has always been consistent. Firstly, it's wrong to take someone else's land and create Israel. Israel is a reality today, and backed by powerful nations. At this point in time, we can't take on powerful people and countries. That, too, is a reality.

"But the struggle of the Palestinian people has had some positive response lately. There are nations in Europe which condemned the Palestinians in the past, but are now changing their stand.

"Surely, we should study this changing position realistically *vis-a-vis* the Palestinian struggle. Malaysia is willing to campaign for the Palestinian cause internationally, but the Islamic world must act together.

"Otherwise, it's not worthwhile," he told the audience as more hands were raised to seek clarification and ask new questions.

A speaker from the front row of the main hall in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Co-operation,

describing the speech and answers as courageous, asked if Dr Mahathir could shed some light on the difference between the suicide bombers and those who strive and strike for independence.

"We cannot condemn people who are desperate," the Prime Minister replied, arguing that the Palestinians were resorting to such acts because no one was helping them.

As in previous discourses on the subject, Dr Mahathir regarded the Palestinian fighters as freedom fighters even though the acts may be regarded as terror attacks as well.

"We can't say they are not terror attacks. They are. But if the world were to seek an end to this, then the Israelis must withdraw and negotiate. You can't negotiate with guns pointed at you," he said.

When asked whether the Islamic world with its combined population of 1.3 billion could make a difference for itself, Dr Mahathir argued that the number may be big but they were fragmented. For instance, there were more Muslims than Jews in the United States, but the former were disunited and do not speak with one voice.

But perhaps the last question was the most intriguing (to some in the audience at least). The speaker began by stating his admiration for the Prime Minister whom he followed in an interview over the Al-Jazeera television network. He asked how would the Prime Minister rationalise between faith and science, between religion and modern management techniques, and whether his views were subscribed

by everyone else in Malaysia.

Articulating his response, Dr Mahathir said that not everyone in Malaysia shared his views as there were sections of the people who opposed progress for reasons best known to themselves.

He said the Islamic world was on the ascendancy for many years, but declined when it did not pursue more worldly knowledge other than religion.

In the early years Islamic scholars gave the world the benefits of science and mathematics, medicine and the arts. But they stopped these pursuits and began pursuing Islamic knowledge only even though there was nothing in the Quran to suggest that they cannot continue to study the sciences.

"We pray for our well-being in the world and in the hereafter. And yet many of us still neglect the pursuits to live well and meaningfully in the world today, preferring instead to concentrate for our life in the hereafter. How could we promote Islam if we don't have the knowledge and skills to make our own clothes; when we don't have the wealth to give alms as demanded by the religion; when we are not in the position and have no technical knowledge to even make our own weapons?"

"Therefore, we have to study the sciences. Since we neglected the sciences, we have regressed. And the neglect of modern management skills has led the *ummah* to continue to depend on others for their well-being, and continuing this would only be to the ummah's detriment."