

# Mahathir's pending meeting with the Pope significant

STAR 29 MAY 2002

THE impending visit by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to the Vatican at the invitation of Pope John Paul II is significant in many ways.

Historically, he will be the first Malaysian leader to meet the Pontiff, the spiritual leader of the Catholic world.

More significantly, he will enter into a global inter-faith dialogue in the search for common ground to build a better world of tomorrow.

The visit is welcomed by all Malaysians, regardless of their religious or political persuasions.

It is a recognition of our



Prime Minister's growing international stature as a pragmatic, progressive and moderate Muslim statesman, the leader of a prosperous, harmonious and united multi-religious nation in a world littered with casualties of so-called ethnic cleansing and religious conflicts.

Far from the days when he

was called a recalcitrant and more often than not, found himself almost a lone voice against a chorus of criticism, Dr Mahathir is today very much sought after by world leaders, including the American President George W. Bush, for his views.

The Sept 11 terrorist attacks on the United States seem to be the turning point.

Dr Mahathir's close rapport with both the West and the Islamic world seems to put him in a strategic position to play a greater role in helping to address some of the world conflicts, particularly the Middle East issue.

He reckons that the Palestinian situation will take centre stage during his meeting with the Pope in the Vatican as it affects not only the Muslims but also the Christians.

But we believe the meeting will showcase to the world that differences in religion and culture are no barrier to peace and harmony as proven by Malaysia, an Islamic nation that allows different faiths to flourish.

We also believe that the fight against terrorism in the aftermath of Sept 11 will feature in the discussion and that will provide an excellent

forum to clear up the misconception that the West has with regard to Islam and terrorism.

Obviously, Dr Mahathir is mindful of the local implications of the historic meeting with the Pope and he has sought the backing of his Cabinet.

We strongly believe that the meeting should rise above party politics and should be supported wholeheartedly by Malaysians of all faiths.

In a world sadly polarised by cultural, religious and ethnic differences, any dialogue is positive and should

be supported.

In this respect, we concur with Umno Youth leader Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein when he expressed his hope that the meeting would set a new tone of co-operation between Muslims and Christians in the world.

Dr Mahathir should know that he has the full blessing of the nation in his meeting with the Pope, now that even Opposition leaders like PAS spiritual adviser Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat and DAP chairman Lim Kit Siang have given their full support.

We wish you every success, Mr Prime Minister.