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AN EVENTFUL YEAR DOMINATED BY THE WAR ON TERROR

By: Abdul Muin Majid

KUALA LUMPUR, Dec 19 (Bernama) -- The trouble started with Sept 11, 2001 and by the time bomb blasted a Bali nightclub one year later, terrorism completes its domination of the international affairs in the year as governments grapple with the shadowless enemies that know no boundaries.

The war against terror led by the United States has seen among others the destruction of a nation, specific countries being branded as terrorist states, people being singled out for closer scrutiny based on their nationalities and religion, and countries indiscriminately slapping travel advisories on other countries.

Indeed, the twists and turns in the international fight against terrorism are worthy of a John Le Carre's spy fiction. The only difference is that, this time, it is for real.

Malaysia and Southeast Asia have found themselves ensnared in the terrorism web with the discovery of terrorist cells in the region with alleged connections to the al-Qaeda terrorist group said to be behind the Sept 11 destruction of the World Trade Centre in New York which killed some three thousand people.

And much to her dismay, Malaysia came under international scrutiny when it emerged that terror suspects linked to the horrific attacks in the US had met several times in Kuala Lumpur.

The international media went to town with the story that Malaysia served as a primary "launch pad" for the attacks on American soil until the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) director Robert S. Mueller III himself poured cold water on the accusation during a visit here in March.

ROOT OUT THE CAUSES TO END TERRORISM

Amidst the unleashing of the awesome American military might on Afghanistan in the wake of Sept 11 to flush out al-Qaeda members led by Saudi militant Osama bin Laden, Malaysia expressed its belief that the root causes of terrorism must be addressed if ever the menace is to be wiped out.

This perception was echoed at various international meetings which Malaysia participated and its most vocal purveyor is none other than Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad himself.

The Prime Minister brought this conviction to the Oval Office when he travelled to the US last May for a high-profile meeting with President George W. Bush during which the American leader thanked Dr Mahathir for his strong support on the war against terror.

Washington and Kuala Lumpur also inked an anti-terror pact that provides, among others, for the exchange and flow of information and intelligence between both sides.

COOPERATION WITH WASHINGTON

Malaysia and the US have shared information and acted against suspected terrorists long before the Sept 11 tragedy.

In New York, a grim-faced Dr Mahathir visited "Ground Zero", the site in downtown Manhattan where the landmark twin towers of the World Trade Centre once stood.

True to her words, Kuala Lumpur allowed the FBI to interview Internal Security Act prisoner, Yazid Sufaat, over his alleged connection to Zacarias Moussaoui, a French national of Moroccan descent who has been

charged in the US for the Sept 11 attacks.

Malaysia also deported in October suspected American terrorist Ahmed Ibrahim Bilal following the revocation of the passport of the International Islamic University Malaysia student by US authorities.

The country's commitment in combating terrorism was further underlined when it agreed to the setting up of a counter-terrorism centre for Southeast Asia in Kuala Lumpur, an idea mooted by US Secretary of State Colin Powell when he visited Malaysia in July.

As noted by government leaders and analysts, fighting terrorism is nothing new to Malaysia as shown by her ability to stamp out the Communist terrorists and crack down on home-grown extremist elements trying to threaten public order and topple the elected government through violence, well even before Sept 11.

FROM BALI TO AFRICA

As the war on terror is waged all over the globe with the backdrop of a possible US-led military attacks on Iraq for suspected concealment of weapons of mass destruction, the world was again jolted -- this time by bomb explosions in Bali on Oct 12 which killed close to 200 people, almost half of them Australians.

The bombings put Indonesia, long accused of dragging her feet on the war against terror, under intense international spotlight and prompted Western governments to put out travel alerts advising their citizens to avoid Southeast Asia.

The move has been roundly condemned by Asean, the regional grouping of 10 Southeast Asian countries which, at its 8th summit in Cambodia last month, decided to hold its 9th meeting in Bali next year in a show of solidarity with Indonesia.

And Dr Mahathir was annoyed by a US State Department statement that Malaysia could face Bali-style attack, prompting him to declare that it was tantamount to an economic sabotage of this country.

SALE OF WATER TO SINGAPORE

Another issue that gained a wide coverage this year is the sale of water by Malaysia to Singapore, with claims and counter-claims traded across the Causeway.

At the core of the row is Kuala Lumpur's intention to increase the price of raw water it sells to the island republic which now stands at three sen per 1,000 gallons under two agreements signed in 1961 and 1962 which expire in 2011 and 2061, respectively.

The two sides are expected to go back to the negotiating table early next year.

Malaysia's deportation of illegals workers especially to Indonesia and the Philippines also made headlines as Kuala Lumpur's decision to imprison and cane those caught working here without proper documentation did not go down well with certain parties.

The burning of the "Jalur Gemilang" at the Malaysian embassy gates in Jakarta in August by demonstrators over the matter elicited angry reactions here but the matter died down after the Indonesia Manpower and Transmigration Minister Jacob Nuwa Wea denounced their action.

ARROYO'S BLUSHES

More serious accusations arising from the deportation exercise came from the Philippines which alleged that Filipinos awaiting repatriation had been ill-treated by Malaysian authorities.

And Manila dropped a bombshell with its claim that a young Philippine national had been raped at a temporary detention depot in Sabah which saw

President Gloria Arroyo writing personally to Dr Mahathir urging the Malaysian government to investigate.

After it was later revealed that the girl is actually a Malaysian, the prime minister told Manila to apologise for jumping to conclusion. But none was forthcoming.

The girl is now back in Malaysia after the Aidilfitri celebration and the authorities had swung into action to probe the allegation and nail the culprits.

INTERNATIONAL ARBITRATION

Malaysia and Indonesia are also locked in a legal battle at the International Court of Justice in The Hague on a dispute involving the sovereignty over Sipadan and Ligitan islands, off the coast of Sabah.

During six days of hearing which started early June, Malaysia presented its case that the two islands are part of a group of islands in Malaysian waters, and are linked to Malaysia economically and socially.

The dispute, which started in 1969, came to an end on Tuesday when the ICJ ruled that the two islands belonged to Malaysia.

Both Indonesia and Malaysia had signed a written undertaking to abide by the ICJ decision and that stroke of the pen showed the world that border disputes can be settled in the most civilised and peaceful way.

Despite a heavy schedule at home, Dr Mahathir visited many countries this year including Britain, Denmark, Russia, Germany, Poland, France, Saudi Arabia, Libya, Morocco, Bahrain, India, Pakistan, Brunei, Thailand, Myanmar, Japan and Vatican City where he met Pope John Paul II.

But his most interesting trip must have been the week-long visit to freezing Antarctica earlier this year aboard a Russian ice-breaker. This is because his visit serves to focus on Malaysia's stand the last wild frontier on earth must belong to all humanity and nations. -- Bernama

MAM KGO