

10/09/2002

Closed hearts, narrow minds

IN his characteristically forthright address to last weekend's Global Leadership Forum at Pangkor Laut, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad struck one poignant note when he remarked that the powerful nations had made no effort to win the hearts and minds of Muslims, but had instead alienated and frustrated them. On the list are Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Sudan, Libya, Iran, Iraq, Chechnya and other Muslim countries. They should have taken a leaf from Malaysia's experience of Templer's campaign in winning over the people during the communist insurgency.

In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks on the United States a year ago, America's Muslims were called upon to explain themselves. Those who could try, did. American-Muslim speakers and writers addressed themselves to the universalities of their faith, attempting to explain and bridge the schism in civilisational ideas between the West and Islam. The hope was that such information might offset the absence of understanding that had bred hatred.

Muslim shopkeepers, meanwhile, took to displaying the American flag with as much patriotic fervour as any of their fellow countrymen; some even composed messages of solidarity to post in their premises to forestall retributions. But they came anyway: mosques and Muslim community centres in several US cities were fire-bombed or vandalised, and anyone who looked Arab had to be on guard and their best behaviour.

One of the most important effects of the past year's traumas should have been a heightened awareness of the roots, history and philosophy of Islam - translations of the Quran were the best-selling books in America in the months after last September. It seems now, however, that Islam has only been "studied" in the dark light of its differences from the "Western" way. There has emerged no deeper knowledge of the truths of Islam in the West; instead, both extremes in this so-called "clash of civilisations" have grown even more deeply entrenched in their prejudices.

The difference is, the Muslim extreme has been firmly rejected by moderate Muslim administrations worldwide, which are to varying degrees addressing their responsibility to curb extremist and fanatical elements within their folds. The Western extreme, however, has the open-throated support of the Commander-in-Chief of the United States and the British Head of Government.

The Bush and Blair administrations may indeed have found no reason to soften the hearts and open the minds of their people - in fact, quite the opposite. For what they seem hell-bent on doing - obliterating the Saddam Hussein regime of Iraq - compassion, circumspection and their innate God-given humanity must have seemed anathema. At this 11th hour of crisis over the impending US-led campaign against Iraq, the thought that the Western axis would wish to acknowledge the humanity under their threat in the Middle East seems almost farcical. Now, it is no longer Muslims who need to explain themselves. But it is highly doubtful if the world's new war-mongers will bother to - even to themselves.