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Talk of `regime change' in Iraq puts world on edge

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THE drums of war are beating louder in the US. President George W. Bush acting as the drum major has British Prime Minister Tony Blair as one of his drummers. The sounds of their drums are so loud that they do not seem to hear anything else but their own drumbeat.

The billions of voices both inside and outside the US are not heard nor is any attention paid to them. As the only superpower, the US is determined to go ahead with its own plan - to get rid of Saddam Hussein - no matter what it takes.

The question increasingly being asked in some quarters is whether the war cry and the "war on terror" are in fact a war against Islam. The religious and racial profiling further strengthens this argument. People from Islamic and Muslim countries are being singled out for closer scrutiny, including fingerprinting, photographing and registering.

But even before this, Malaysians, including Malaysian government leaders, have been subjected to stricter checks on arrival in the US, which Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad described as an "anti-Muslim hysteria".

War on terror, "disarming this (Saddam) man", regime change and anti-Muslim hysteria have also brought to the open the double standards and hypocrisy of the world's superpower.

Bush says Iraq has violated 16 UN resolutions and ignored the world body.

Israel has violated more than 30 UN resolutions and continues to terrorise innocent people and yet Washington turns a blind eye. Is Israel subject to a different set of rules and laws?

Bush has given the UN an ultimatum and appears to be telling the world body "Do what we say or be declared irrelevant". Why is the President adamant to have the "regime change" even as the rest of the world is against war and seeks a political and peaceful solution?

Why is Saddam now the serious threat that the Bush Administration says he is? Why was he not so a year ago when Bush took office?

Is it unfinished family business? Family pride and honour? Is it "Wag the Dog" theory all over again? Is it economics and oil resources? Or is it part of the "global Pax Americana" blueprint entitled "Rebuilding America's Defences: Strategies, Forces and Resources For A New Century".

The blueprint was drawn up in September 2000 by Dick Cheney, now Vice-President, Donald Rumsfeld, now Defence Secretary, Paul Wolfowitz, Deputy Defence Secretary, Jeb Bush, the President's younger brother and Lewis Libby, Cheney's chief of staff.

It talks of an "American grand strategy" and supports a "blueprint for maintaining global US pre-eminence, precluding the rise of a great power rival and shaping the international security order in line with American principles and interests".

"The United States has for decades sought to play a more permanent role in Gulf regional security. While the unresolved conflict with Iraq provides the immediate justification, the need for a substantial American force presence in the Gulf transcends the issue of the regime of Saddam Hussein."

This is in the blueprint drawn up before Bush took over. But the tough talk and determination of the Bush Administration for a "regime change" now has put the world on edge.

The war cry has the world markets falling and the world economy is taking a beating. The Standard & Poor's 500 index, the benchmark of big US companies' share prices, ended the third quarter at its lowest level since 1987. The Dow closed at its lowest level since Aug 31, 1987 and brought to an end a grim third quarter with the index shedding 16.7 per cent.

The consumer sentiment, which held up surprisingly well after the Sept 11 attacks, is beginning to dip. With Washington's focus on Saddam, the attention is diverted away from efforts to deal with the sputtering economy. Some speak of the double-dip recession in the US while others talk of a depression.

The ripples are beginning to be felt in other areas as well. The world finance ministers meeting in Washington over the weekend amid concerns about the risks to global economic growth gave no hope to the poor. Many from the developing countries returned home disappointed.

The unfolding corporate scandals in the US, the financial crisis and fragile Latin American economies coupled with the war cries do not make for an encouraging or bright world economic outlook. Oil prices are moving up and analysts expect that a US attack on Iraq could send the price of oil beyond US\$50 (RM190) a barrel.

This could act as a drag on the American economy which has already decelerated from five per cent annualised growth in the first quarter to 1.1 per cent in the second quarter this year.

But there are also potential benefits for American companies from the attack on Iraq. The Washington Post reported earlier this month that one of the collateral consequences of the "regime change" in Iraq would be "a bonanza for American oil companies long banished from Iraq, scuttling oil deals between Baghdad and Russia, France and other countries and reshuffling petroleum markets".

According to the Jordan Times, the US "is blackmailing countries which already have deals with Iraq into supporting the Bush Administration's policy so they would be graciously permitted to cash in on their agreements in the post-Saddam Hussein era which, Washington expects, will be dominated by US companies".

On the political front the "war on terror" is not going according to plan and has many shortcomings. Osama bin Laden is still at large even as al-Qaeda has been driven out of bunkers, the problems of Afghanistan - which is poverty-stricken, violent and ungovernable - remain.

The tension and war cry masks the administration's involvement and the failure to tackle massive corporate corruption and scandals at home - and that at the highest levels. Even the President, the Vice-President and Treasury Secretary have come under scrutiny for their business dealings.

And with crucial mid-term elections coming up, there is a need to divert attention away from the numerous domestic economic, corporate, political and personal problems and scandals faced by the administration.

Saddam offers that distraction and, conveniently too, the Muslim world comes under greater scrutiny and religious profiling.

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