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Dr M's meeting with the Pope seen as timely and significant by the Vatican

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ON a balmy spring afternoon on Friday, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad stepped out of an Alfa Romeo, his official car during his visit to the Vatican, to speak to reporters after his meeting with Pope John Paul II.

In the background was the magnificent ancient St Peter's Basilica. Tourists had already arrived to visit this sacred site and centre of the Roman Catholic faith and home of the Pope, its 82-year-old head.

The venue for the informal Press conference was indeed unusual, but given the nature of the Prime Minister's visit, it seemed fitting.

It was fruitful, he said of the meeting with the Pope, or Giovanni Paolo II as he is known in Italy.

"We wanted to present our views and we were able to do that," he said.

Indeed, the views were on violence and terrorism in the Middle-East. Dr Mahathir said he had made a plea for an end to the violence and terrorism in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Prime Minister had also met with the Vatican's Secretary of State, Cardinal Sodano, during which they both spoke at length on the issue. Whether or not Dr Mahathir's meeting with Pope John Paul II and Sodano would contribute to world peace and solidarity, as hoped by the Vatican, remains to be seen.

His meeting was timely and significant in the wake of the impaired and negative image of Islam and Muslims in the world. As a Vatican official told Malaysian journalists a day before Dr Mahathir's arrival, the Vatican viewed his meeting with the Holy Father to be "very important" in inter-religious dialogues that would contribute to peace and solidarity in the world.

Perhaps, that was really how important the Vatican regarded Dr Mahathir's meeting and how much faith and hope it had in this Malaysian Prime Minister who has been regarded as a moderate Muslim leader.

(In the course of his discussion with Sodano, Dr Mahathir spoke of religious freedom in Malaysia. Sodano expressed his deep gratitude that Catholics are allowed to freely practise their faith.)

What is clear is that Dr Mahathir has been able to present his views, which are Malaysia's, to the head of the Roman Catholic Church who is an influential international figure.

Malaysia's stand on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and on terrorism is clear - that there is a need to end the violence in the troubled area and that the root and causes of terrorism be removed.

Malaysia also believes that there should be a third party to separate the combatants in the conflict to stop the spiral of violence. Dr Mahathir said the Vatican was in agreement with Malaysia's views on this.

This is not quite surprising as Pope John Paul II has been outspoken about the subject in his regular messages in the Vatican newsletter Bolletino Sala Stampa Della Santa Sede, which is published in several languages.

The Pope, as everyone knows, is not a politician. "He speaks from his heart," said an Italian journalist. Malaysians have every reason to be excited about Dr Mahathir's meeting which a Vatican official stressed was not a courtesy call.

There is, of course, the temptation by some to downplay or even dismiss the significance of his visit to the Vatican and his meeting with the head

of the Catholic Church who is the successor of St Peter and Vicar of Christ. But that would be downright naive.

Dr Mahathir's arrival at the private library of Giovanni Paolo II to make his plea for peace in the Middle East is far-reaching. Historic, even.

"People of many languages in many, many countries will know of his visit," said a Vatican official, as she watched Dr Mahathir leave in the Alfa Romeo.

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