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Fighting global terrorism - separating real threats from the imagined

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AUSTRALIAN Prime Minister John Howard wants to deploy the nation's troops in South-east Asia in its war against terrorism.

His proposal came about in the wake of the Oct 12 Bali bombing which killed some 180 people, among them a significant number of Australians.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has opposed the idea, arguing that the deployment of Australian or any foreign troops for that matter in the region may only result in them becoming targets of terrorist activities.

Howard's suggestion is nothing new.

After all, Australian troops were based in Butterworth until a few years ago.

They were here from 1948 when the then Malaya, in post-Japanese occupation, was caught in the quagmire of communist insurgency.

Australian troops, together with British and New Zealand personnel, fought alongside local security forces against the Communists.

It was a long drawn out battle, only officially ending when the Malayan Communist Party and the Malaysian Government signed a peace accord in 1989.

The Royal Australian Air Force had actually handed over its base in Butterworth a year earlier, very much so because the need for Australian troops in Malaysia had become redundant.

It also coincided well with Australia's demilitarisation policies, apart from the subsequent downfall of the Soviet Union which led to the end of the Cold War.

Today, there are no more Communists.

There are only terrorists, identified by the Western media as Muslim terrorists.

Today too, Malaya has become Malaysia, an independent nation which has, since its independence in 1957, grown from strength to strength and managed its affairs well, be they in security or economics.

She has charted her policies and direction according to her interests.

To allow the presence of Australian or any other foreign troops here would be tantamount to admitting her inability to handle her domestic affairs, especially since she had started her fight against militancy long before the Sept 11, 2001 tragedy.

It is almost a *deja vu* of what is occurring in this region right now.

In 1948 when communist insurgency threatened to engulf the region, Malaya, pre- and post-independence, was focused on what it was up against.

The fear of the domino effect led Western forces, led by the United States, to extend its interest in this region.

Then, while Malaya was battling the Communists, Indonesia, under Sukarno, was leaning towards the Iron Curtain nations.

However, that led to the downfall of Sukarno, and with that the purging of Communists and other leftist elements began, led by Suharto with the support of the US.

It was a massacre.

Today, the proposal by Howard to deploy Australian troops in the region, is almost akin to the battle against the Communists, even then, described as terrorists.

Malaysia's campaign against the communist terrorists was successful, with quite a substantial support from foreign troops, Australia included.

While it would be unfair to ignore the contributions of the foreign forces in the fight against the Communists, their support was not merely in the interest of Malaysia but also their own in ensuring that the scales of the Cold War was tilted in their favour.

There were numerous factors under consideration then, economics being quite important.

But whatever the factors then in the fight against the Communists, the fight now against terrorism has taken numerous twists and there is too much suspicion involved.

In the campaign against the Communists, Malaysia then was still a "protectorate" of the British, and its policies were very much influenced by its former colonial master.

Then too, the Malaysian Government had no reservations in fighting the Communists.

While Malaysia has actually been the one in the region to take the lead to weed out militants and religious extremists, even before Sept 11, the motives of Western nations in dealing with terrorism are highly suspect and, at times, anti-Islam.

At the same time, it is also quite baffling to Malaysians, especially its moderate Muslims, why the terrorists, who have been identified as Muslims, bombed an entertainment centre filled with foreigners in Bali.

The act does not serve the Muslim interest in any way whatsoever and if anything, is detrimental to the majority Muslim populace in Indonesia and its neighbours.

The bombings give the US, Australia and Britain ammunition to proceed with whatever military actions they plan against any nation suspected of harbouring terrorists.

Indonesia now has to act, and act fast, to weed out terrorists.

Failing which, the US, through its economic tools such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), will squeeze the republic dry.

Australia now proposes to deploy its troops in the region.

Foreign publications now paint Indonesia and Malaysia with one brush, threatening the economy of both nations.

At the same time, Western nations are deciding which Muslim nation it wants to declare as being of high risk to its citizens. Malaysia and the rest of the Islamic world are at their mercy.

If it is true that the bombing in Bali was committed by Islamic terrorists, then woe betide the most populous Islamic nation in the world. It will be offered on a silver platter to the West to chew on and spit out.

It will truly be pitiful, for what is spat out is always drained of juice.