

10 MAY 2002

Mahathir-Visit (Special Report)

WAR OF WORDS TURNS INTO WAR AGAINST TERRORISM

By: Salmy Hashim

WASHINGTON, May 10 (Bernama) -- It is ironic that the tragic events of Sept 11 could have "thawed" the seemingly "cold" relations between the United States and Malaysia.

The sharp verbal sparring between Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and top-level officials in the Clinton administration over the arrest and jailing of Anwar Ibrahim, human rights, Malaysia's justice system, and its handling of the financial crisis, has died down, although Dr Mahathir is likely to continue to speak his mind in the near future and draw some discomfort in the Bush administration.

Malaysia's fight against extremism started long before Sept 11 last year with the arrests of members of the Al Ma'unah accused of attempting to overthrow the Yang di-Pertuan Agong through violent means, and the detention of 62 members of Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM) under the Internal Security Act.

The arrests of Al Ma'unah and KMM members were initially regarded by many in Washington as another attempt by Dr Mahathir to quash the opposition, but the scepticism was somewhat muted after September.

"Malaysia's motives at first were thought to be domestic politics. Since then (Sept 11), Malaysia has proven to be an actual friend," Dana Dillon, a senior Southeast Asian analyst at the conservative Heritage Foundation here told Bernama.

The surprise attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York and on the Pentagon in Washington by members of Al-Qaeda last year has jolted America to action and opened its eyes to the danger of terrorism and extremism.

Dillon said that the United States was looking for a partner in Southeast Asia and in the Islamic world in its fight against terrorism. "Malaysia fits in that, working together in law enforcement and diplomacy."

He pointed out that the US had put a lot of hope in Indonesia -- because it is a big country with a big Muslim population, "but Indonesia is a big disappointment".

Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri was one of the first Southeast Asian leaders invited to the White House to discuss with President George W. Bush immediately after the attacks, but many in Washington remain disappointed with the lack of progress by the Indonesian government in rounding up terrorist suspects.

Prof Datuk Dr Zakaria Ahmad, Tun Razak Chair of Southeast Asian Studies at Ohio University, Athens, said that the official meeting between Dr Mahathir and Bush on May 14 at the White House would open Washington's eyes and minds to a different voice on Islam, the war on terrorism, and the West Asian crisis from the perspective of a progressive Muslim leader.

"There are some who regard Dr Mahathir as a genius, a visionary -- but the problem is that he is way ahead of everybody, and often misunderstood," he added.

Meanwhile, Malaysian Prof Datuk Dr Osman Bakar, of Georgetown University here, said Dr Mahathir's visit to the White House is backed by two major achievements in the fight against terrorism: "First, his leadership in putting together a regional treaty on counter-terrorism has borne fruit, and second is the OIC (Organisation of Islamic Conference) ministerial meeting on terrorism he hosted in KL."

"Although his definition of terrorism was not accepted at the meeting, at least he succeeded in gathering a majority of Muslim countries to

address the issues."

Since Sept 11, the Muslim world was without a strong voice to address the issue of terrorism. Through the OIC meeting in KL, he appears to have taken the leading role in articulating the issue from the viewpoint of a Muslim leader, Osman said.

He could impress upon Bush that his interest in fighting terrorism was not limited to the region alone, but he was also interested in the global dimension of the problem, especially in the Muslim world, the Georgetown professor added.

In an interview, James A. Kelly, Assistant Secretary of State for East Asia and Pacific Affairs, said that the two leaders would likely have an "honest talk" about the West Asian crisis, "which is not an area of particular agreement between the two".

But, he added, the president was interested to hear the prime minister's views because "in the end, we all want the same thing in the Middle East (West Asia) -- a lasting peace in that very troubled area".

Malaysian Pamela Sodhy, visiting professor of history at Georgetown University here, said that while ties between the two countries were improving, it could be derailed by an escalation of the conflict in the occupied territories, and the US war on Iraq looming in the horizon.

"Malaysia will side with the Muslim countries or whoever is right, while the US will strongly back Israel resulting in friction and polarisation," said Sodhy.

Fundamentally, she pointed out, relationship between the two countries remained solid with trade, investment, educational and defence relations at an all-time high.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Tun Abdul Razak, who was here last week, described the strong bilateral defence relationship as a "well-kept secret".

In addition to US ship visits, training exercises, and the US-sponsored military training programme (IMET) that has benefited 1,500 Malaysian defence personnel, Malaysia has approved more US overflights per year since Sept 11, exchanged intelligence, and actively identified and frozen assets of terrorists.

The question is what happens after the Washington meeting? Now that the three Asean nations -- Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines -- have signed a counter-terrorism pact, should America give all the encouragement to these nations to deal with terrorism in the region without the necessity of maintaining US troops in any Asean country?

It would be good for the future of Asean solidarity that the treaty be allowed to succeed. The pact shows that Asean is capable of taking the lead in combating terrorism in the region. There are already indications that other Asean nations want to get on board. Asean has matured and can handle its own security.

-- BERNAMA

SH AHH RM