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Killing two birds with one bomb in Bali

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GOOD day, mate! How ya doin? Like most Malaysians I love travelling. Heard of Wagga Wagga, Wangaratta? That's about where I am - down under and safe, very much so, despite terror attacks in the region.

Yes, in one of the most peaceful parts of the Western world, in the Southern Hemisphere that, since World War 11, has never experienced bloodshed nor massive devastation to civilian lives, other than natural disasters like bush fires, droughts and flood.

Many see Australians as laid-back, easy-going mates who love the outback and backpack regularly to Bali and Langkawi.

Their enthusiasm to understand Indonesia, their closest backyard neighbour can be seen in their interest to study the Malay language (known as Indonesian here) incorporated formally, as the learning of language other than English (Lote) in the curriculum of several schools.

Australia's cultural interest in its neighbour and region as a whole, seems however, outshaded by its foreign policy, that since Oct 12, may take new shape due to severe beating - as demonstrated in letters-to-editor columns as well as talkback radio.

Peace marches in the streets of Melbourne prior to Oct 12, renouncing Howard's tune to Bush's war-drum beats, seem to have fallen on deaf ears.

Living and breathing in other cultures makes us discover ourselves and reminds us how special it is to be Malaysians. As we travel, we are enriched by cultural diversity and this cultural wealth deepens our understanding and strengthens our appreciation of humanity.

Our attempts to see others in their shoes, and to experience joy and pain through travel and cross-cultural ties, seem short-lived due to terror activities.

Soon, leaving home may become a traumatic thought for many. Compassion, however, will prevail as we lose hope in regional politics and lose faith in international rhetoric.

More so, as we see peace-loving, fun-seeking holiday-goers indiscriminately murdered and maimed by evil means.

Why isn't Megawati Sukarnoputri doing enough to combat Islamic extremism - as her father had - in wiping out the likes of Jemaah Islamiah (JI) as Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has with extremists such as the Kumpulan Militan Malaysia (KMM)?

The Australian media, in many unsung ways, are full of praises for Malaysia.

An attack on a revenue-churning and tourist magnetic spot in a Hindu island in the world's most populous Islamic nation, and in a region acclaimed for Islamic wealth, is clearly the destruction of two birds with one bomb - Western hegemony and Eastern liberal and moderate ways.

As Bali no longer becomes the favourite holiday spot for Australians, there is every possibility Langkawi too will wane as fear looms over terror in Southeast Asia.

Will this region, become the next Middle East? Is this a new era of a new form of Arab recolonisation of Southeast Asia?

Yes, Southeast Asia is now being painted as a region of great fear and threat to world peace at large. Terrorism, as we see it dangerously closer to home now, has become a global phenomenon the world must reckon with.

It is no longer an issue of you scratch my back and I yours or an eye for an eye or birds of a feather flock together.

It calls for a stain-free, objective stance geared toward a single goal for human-kind - peace. This is important if we wish to avoid the Palestine-Israel conflict escalating and diversifying into a global war.

It also means Australia must recognise that it is at one and the same time a Western nation and an Eastern friend; a Western culture with a potpourri of Eastern people and values.

If it is true that charity must begin at home, Australia must work harder at creating and strengthening its own identity as a strong independent nation in Southeast Asia and no longer seen as a mere shadow or puppet of the US.

Malaysia, like Indonesia, profits from tourism and much is invested in developing this industry, which brings in foreign currency, builds cultural solidarity and provides a livelihood for many.

Like the scores of Australians who died and hundreds injured with many more missing, many hundreds of poor Balinese too have withered without much mention.

For those Balinese still alive and those Indonesian cities dependent on the tourism dollar, it seems like the end of the road.

The pathways to cross-cultural enrichment through tourism and the airways to the warm hearts of Southeast Asia - a paradise for much of the Western world - seem today carnaged and damaged by fear of terror.

Unless Indonesia wakes up to act quickly against all forms of extremism, putting aside selfish domestic politics, and Australia stands up in the interest of regional peace, global efforts to combat terrorism may fail as the network and the cells creep closer to our doorsteps.

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