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Abdullah stands firm in US

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IT is perhaps inevitable, but Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's every move now is viewed in the light of his succession to the country's top post next year.

His working visit to the United States last week was certainly cast in this light, and read for clues to his leadership style, his views on burning global issues and his position in international relations.

The Americans wanted to know the new Malaysian leadership style that would take root from October next year as bilateral ties had grown closer following Malaysia's support for the war against terrorism.

Abdullah left no doubt in the minds of Americans that he greatly valued friendly relations with the US and would continue the momentum of improving ties, after a period of coolness sparked by the then Vice-President Al Gore's crude support for street demonstrators in 1998.

The icy relations thawed after Sept 11 as the Bush administration sought friends in the moderate Muslim world. In May, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad set the wheels in motion when he made a milestone visit to Washington, as guest of President George W. Bush.

In July, Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Malaysia.

Abdullah told the Americans that Malaysia continued to attach great importance to friendly and stable relations with the US, and supported the fight against terrorism on all fronts.

Indeed, he said he chose to make the two-day visit to Washington after addressing the 57th United Nations General Assembly in New York, for the specific reason of giving a further lift to US-Malaysia relations.

The relationship of close cooperation remains strong despite the US newspapers' continued branding of Malaysia as a state with terrorist links, and the US Government's regrettable inclusion of Malaysia in the list of 26 nations requiring extra-stringent visa checks.

The visa delays were inconvenient to Malaysian travellers, many of whom cancelled holiday plans to the US, and distressing to students who had to give up hard-won university places.

Abdullah tackled the issue of the unfair profiling of Malaysia and Islam at meetings with Vice-President Dick Cheney, National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice and Homeland Security director Tom Ridge.

Assurances were forthcoming, along with unexpectedly immediate results. A day after receiving an assurance from Ridge that the US Government had "substantially reduced" the visa processing time for Malaysian students, the US Embassy in Kuala Lumpur received approval to issue several hundred visas.

It was good news for at least 200 Malaysian students, all males, who had almost given up hope of getting their visas on time to enrol into American universities.

But until Malaysia is taken off the visa watch list of 26 nations, drawn up purely through the profiling of Islamic countries, Malaysian students will think twice about applying to US universities in future years.

This was a point noted by Congressman Pete Sessions, a Republican from Texas, and a co-chair of the Malaysia-America Friendship Caucus set up in May to disseminate accurate information about Malaysia.

He said the delays had also caused a lot of concern to American educational institutions, especially those relying on foreign intake, and left a dent on the tourism sector as well.

Even as Abdullah continued the renewal of Malaysia's friendship with the US, he made it a point to stress repeatedly that Malaysia remained independent in its views.

"We don't do anything because we are ordered to," he said.

This was more than evident in Abdullah's strong statement to the UN General Assembly in New York, and also during a bilateral meeting with Iraqi Foreign Minister Najib Sabri on the sidelines of the assembly.

Malaysia was neither on the side of US nor Iraq over the pressing issue of the day - America's lobby for a new Security Council resolution which would authorize it to use force against Iraq to force compliance with commitments made after the 1991 Gulf War.

Malaysia, he said, wanted Iraq to comply with Security Council resolutions including allowing the return of weapons inspectors, but warned that a US-led preemptive strike without credible evidence could lead to a clash between the Muslim world and the West.

And it wanted the multilateral process and the United Nations to be the focal point of any action.

In private meetings in Washington, Abdullah reiterated these points and occasionally quite forcefully too, according to those who were present.

In fact, his meeting with Rice was said to be quite animated as she was adamant in her stand for war against Iraq and dismissed concerns about a possible backlash in the Muslim world.

His closed-door dialogue with former top White House officials, academics and businessmen, hosted by think tank Heritage Foundation in Washington DC, was also said to be lively.

Strong views were expressed all round on issues such as Islam in a modern world, the war against terrorism, Iraq and the plight of the Palestinians, and Abdullah was said to have been firm in his replies to questions.

He told the dialogue participants that Malaysia was a progressive and liberal Islamic nation, and different from those which hold a dogmatic and literalist view of Islam.

In a sense, Abdullah is on familiar ground here, with his Islamic educational background and moderate nature, factors which the Far Eastern Economic Review highlighted in a flattering article the week before his visit, describing him as a "model Muslim leader".

And of course, he was Foreign Minister for many years.

Abdullah came across as resolute and determined, and his openness was noted by Congressman Gregory Meeks (Democrat-New York), co-chair of the Malaysia Caucus, who described the US' relationship with Malaysia as one that is based on truth.

Meeks had, in fact, highlighted in Congress Malaysia's efforts to fight terrorism, just days after his meeting with Abdullah at Capitol Hill.

Meeks was speaking at the House International Relations Committee after Powell made his Congressional testimony on Iraq.

The timing of Abdullah's visit was apt; it was in the week of the Sept 11 anniversary, notwithstanding extremely tight security in New York.

It gave him the opportunity to make clear Malaysia's position on issues related to terrorism, and he did so with conviction.