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Malaysia a worthy role model

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BY any standard, it has been a great time for Malaysia on the foreign front. Malaysia has chalked up stupendous achievements and continues to be courted by both big and small nations.

The fact that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has been receiving numerous invitations to visit other countries conveys the high regard Malaysia commands.

Add to this the frequency with which many foreign leaders are flying into Kuala Lumpur, and a grand picture forms.

Malaysia's neutrality, its moderate stance, its courage to criticise wrongs even if they are perpetrated by big powers and its leadership by example have all won applause.

In fact, many foreign leaders - especially those from the so-called Third World - have admitted that Malaysia has become a showcase for developing and underdeveloped nations.

This explains why many delegations come from African and other countries to Kuala Lumpur to learn the Malaysian secret.

Sudan, for instance, wants not only to copy the Malaysian methodology in Federal-State relationship but also Tabung Haji schemes and policies geared towards the eradication of poverty and about Malaysia Incorporated.

Many developing countries have adopted or adapted Malaysian policies and methods.

Malaysia continues to have good relations with her neighbours. And even though Kuala Lumpur and Singapore have not resolved a package of issues - including the purchase of water - it has not resulted in acrimony.

In recent months, several Asean leaders flew in and Dr Mahathir visited their capitals.

One of the major foreign policy success stories must surely be the reconciliation process in Myanmar.

While many nations wanted to ostracise the military junta in Myanmar, Kuala Lumpur pushed for a policy of constructive engagement.

Kuala Lumpur played a pivotal role in Myanmar's entry into Asean in 1997.

Dr Mahathir has endeavoured to bring the junta and Opposition leader Aung San Suu-Kyi together.

United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan picked Tan Sri Razali Ismail two years ago as his special envoy to resolve the Myanmar problem.

Razali has been instrumental in starting closed-door reconciliation talks between the two groups. His series of visits and meetings with both sides culminated in the unconditional release of Suu-Kyi from 19 months of house arrest in April.

She has since been successfully testing the limits of her freedom without incident. Many imprisoned Opposition members have been released and Suu-Kyi appears to have softened her stand on some issues. This holds promise for a resolution of the issue.

After Sept 11, the fight against terrorism became an added worldwide imperative and in May, Malaysia, the Philippines and Indonesia signed a memorandum to strengthen co-operation in checking terrorist activities, particularly cross-border terrorism.

The agreement will ensure integrated action by the security forces of all three nations to counter terrorist activities.

Malaysia and the US also signed an agreement, in Washington, to step up

co-operation to combat international terrorism.

And when Secretary of State Colin Powell visited Malaysia last month, he suggested that Malaysia becomes the Southeast Asian centre for anti-terrorist activities.

US presidents are rather selective about issuing invitations. And the fact that President George W. Bush invited Dr Mahathir to Washington demonstrates the importance the superpower places on Malaysia.

It also is an acknowledgment by Washington of the influence Dr Mahathir wields on developing and underdeveloped nations. Coming on the heels of Sept 11 and the anti-terrorism campaign, it shows Kuala Lumpur's moderate position is what the world needs today.

Dr Mahathir's four-day visit to the US from May 13, therefore, has heralded a new era in relations between the two nations.

Dr Mahathir received a very warm welcome from Bush and his administration and the President had high praise for Malaysia, particularly its rapid modernisation, prosperity and moderate stance.

After his meeting with Bush, Dr Mahathir said: "If previously Malaysia was regarded as insignificant, now it looks like we are being given greater attention and at the same time they are placing high hopes on Malaysia".

Then came another major invitation, this time from the Vatican. This meeting between Dr Mahathir and the Pope was also a meeting of minds between a Christian and a Muslim leader.

Again, the invitation shows the high esteem Malaysia commands, and not just in the political arena.

Dr Mahathir also accepted invitations to visit other countries such as Russia, China and Japan. He was welcomed warmly when he accepted invitations from many smaller and less developed countries too.

Some countries have asked Malaysia to play a bigger role in conflict areas such as the Middle-East. And at the height of the India-Pakistan standoff, there were reports of calls that Kuala Lumpur should mediate. Sri Lanka, which is aching for peace, has also invited Dr Mahathir to visit Colombo.

Several countries which criticised Malaysia's tough laws in the past have, after Sept 11, tightened their own laws and copied some aspects of our laws.

While all this speaks volumes about Malaysia's foreign policies and Dr Mahathir's stature in the world arena, it also is a reflection of the stability and prosperity that the country enjoys.

As Malaysia celebrates Merdeka, its people can certainly stand tall. Kuala Lumpur has become a global voice that is heard and actively courted.