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All eyes and ears on the historic Dr M-Pope meeting

Balan Moses

THE eyes of the entire world were on the Vatican City on Friday when Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad met the head of the world Catholic community, Pope John Paul II, to discuss bilateral issues and others involving Muslims and Christians.

As befitting the story of the day, the Bahasa Malaysia newspapers, and indeed others, led off their front pages with the meeting which focused on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Both Berita Harian and Utusan Malaysia ran screaming headlines which proclaimed the importance of the meeting with an accompanying photograph of Dr Mahathir meeting the Pope.

Dr Mahathir was quoted by Berita Harian as saying that both leaders were agreed on the fact that third-party intervention was needed to resolve the conflict. The newspapers also quoted the Prime Minister as saying that they also concurred on the need for negotiation to be the basis for the conflict resolution and the root of the problem be addressed.

Utusan Malaysia had earlier in the week run a story quoting Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar as saying that Islamic leaders elsewhere in the world would be watching the meeting closely. He had said that the meeting would be the proper platform for both leaders to discuss current issues of mutual interest.

Utusan Malaysia quoted Syed Hamid as saying that the visit would focus on the West Asia issue, terrorism and understanding of Islam.

Last week also saw Dr Mahathir announcing the Government's decision to open the matriculation programme to non-Bumiputera students. As expected, the announcement, on the heels of the controversy surrounding the use of meritocracy as a yardstick for entry into universities, saw mixed reaction from the Bumiputera community and non-Bumiputeras.

Utusan Malaysia quoted the Prime Minister as saying that what was happening was that some matriculation students, especially those from the Mara colleges, did not know students of other races at all.

The next day, the newspaper quoted Dr Mahathir as saying that there were provisions for the entry of non-Bumiputeras into Mara junior science colleges (MRSM) but that he did not know who had suspended the exercise.

Berita Harian, in an editorial last week, said the Government had been both soft and determined as far as the issue of meritocracy in entering university this year was concerned. This, the newspaper opined, was because the Government had been willing to sacrifice the 55 per cent quota for Bumiputeras while telling the community in no uncertain terms that the path to the ivory tower was not going to be easy any more.

Berita Harian felt that the move to allow 10 per cent of places in Mara junior colleges to non-Bumiputeras was also an encouraging move towards better understanding among the youth of various races. Just like Bumiputeras had been able to compete under the meritocracy system to enter university, the newspaper was of the opinion that they would be able to compete with non-Bumiputeras in such colleges.