

08/12/2002

Pressure grows more intense

AT the last Aidilfitri, weeks after the Sept 11 attacks and in the thick of war in Afghanistan, Muslims the world over celebrated the end of Ramadan with a sobering thought: No, they were not going to dance to Osama bin Laden's militant drums to wage jihad against the infidels of the West; but yes, they might have to gird themselves against the Western jingoes who are stupidly turning themselves into unthinking enemies of the faith.

United States President George W. Bush took some pains early on to point out that the "war on terror" was not a war on Islam. Since then, Washington - fired up by its America-Firsters and power-drunk hawks - has progressively declined to make too fine a point of it. Something about the religion of Islam, whose sense of brotherhood embraces all-comers with few questions, makes for an easy disposition to conspiracy, it is said. This ignorant suspicion goads the US and its chief lackeys Britain, and now Australia, to pile on heavier demands of proof on their allies in the Muslim world.

The Muslim world largely backed the American-led campaign, resisting often valid home-grown opposition to Uncle Sam. In spite of the near-pogrom against Muslim visitors and communities in the US and Australia, moderate Islamic countries (that is, nearly all of them) asked for American support, warning of an upsurge in radicalism if support was withheld.

"East Asians worry about American heavy-handedness in the war on terror, unilateralism, poor communication with the Islamic world. In other words, they worry that American foreign policy will fail," wrote Fareed Zakaria recently in Newsweek magazine. Many Islamic leaders deplore the brutality of the militant extremists. It takes bravery - the West doesn't realise how much - to speak out against this kind of terrorism. Those who do speak out should know that the West, particularly the US, is listening and will respond with appropriate policies. But it hasn't.

Blanket travel advisories were the worst part of this blunderbuss approach. Now, however, Australia, taking a toady's share of America's thirst for revenge after the massacre of its nationals in the Bali bombings, has proposed that the United Nations Charter and international law be rewritten to permit extra-territorial "pre-emptive" strikes in the name of self-defence. The furore this has caused is in direct proportion to its barminess, since it threatens to pull the plug on the accelerating levels of co-operation elicited from Asean as well as the Muslim countries.

For this Aidilfitri, last year's sobering thought has turned into something in the order of a crisis of humanity. Muslims are being made into outcasts. In his Hari Raya address, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad urged Muslims to unite to make Malaysia a model Islamic nation in a world growing increasingly hostile to Islam.

"Show how we as Muslims, who are the majority group in Malaysia, can be judicious to non-Muslims. Let us show them the true Islam, as true Muslims," he said. The damage done by the violent extremists has gone beyond economic sabotage. It has reached the intensity of a rooted prejudice - the most difficult to remove, as seen in the persistence of the perception that the country is a terrorist haven despite its earnest and largely successful efforts against its own militants. The crisis is now as much between the West and Islam as within Islam itself.

The West should, instead of hampering this, be more helpful with fewer Howard-like gaffes, and no unwarranted advisories.