

24/07/2004

Shared views on multilateralism

ON Monday, French President Jacques Chirac told Ariel Sharon that he was no longer welcome in France after the Israeli Prime Minister said French Jews should emigrate to escape anti-semitism. In contrast, Chirac extended a warm welcome to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi at their lunch meeting at the Elysee Palace in Paris on Thursday. Indeed, ties between Malaysia and France have never been stronger, thanks in no small measure to the cordial relations between former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad and the French President.

The concordance of views between Paris and Kuala Lumpur on Iraq and the Palestinian question meant that the Prime Minister found a supportive ear for his efforts to rally international support on behalf of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference for the resumption of the stalled Middle East peace process. Like Malaysia, France is concerned over delays to the implementation of the Quartet's road map and believes it is the best way to achieve a peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Like Malaysia, France supported the General Assembly resolution condemning the West Bank security barrier and demanding its dismantling. Although Israel is furious with the European Union, and with France in particular, for their votes, and sees no further role for the Europeans in peace negotiations, there is no reason to think that France can no longer play a part. Given its role in the Quartet, membership of the Security Council and its longstanding support and financial assistance to the Palestinian Authority, and humanitarian aid to the Palestinian refugees, the OIC definitely needs the French connection to resolve the Palestinian question.

At the Asean-EU level, it is hoped that the friendship between the two countries will lead to an acceptable compromise over Myanmar's participation in the Asia-Europe Meeting this October. There is no doubt that the Prime Minister's visit has had positive effects on bilateral relations and should give a big boost to trade and investment as well as to tourism and education.

(END)