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A peacemaker role cut out for Dr Mahathir

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THE presence of Philippine President Gloria Arroyo at the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) Summit in Putrajaya at the special invitation of the summit chairman and host, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, is of special significance not only to the Philippines but also Malaysia.

The significance of the Philippines is that its President's presence at the OIC Summit lends credibility to its Government in the eyes of its Muslim minority population, some of whom are clamouring for a separate Muslim State in the southern Philippine island of Mindanao.

For Malaysia, the significance is best underscored by our persistent problems with securing our maritime borders off Sabah which adjoins the outlying southern Philippine islands. No amount of money and effort will make it fool-proof unless the political restiveness in our neighbouring regions is addressed and solved.

Malaysia clearly also has high stakes in showing to the rest of the world, in particular the United States, how international terrorism ought to be tackled.

The first step is not to unnecessarily antagonise and alienate political rebels with a global smear campaign labelling them as terrorists, in the process forgetting that the rebels often have causes with which the local population identifies.

Both the Philippine and US Governments have thankfully resisted this temptation as far as the remaining rebels in the Moro Islamic National Front are concerned, in spite of some evidence pointing to at least complicity by the MILF in politically-motivated violence.

That said, bringing the MILF to the negotiating table with the Philippine Government, as Malaysia is strenuously trying to do, has not been easy. The problem is not always with the MILF.

Manila has at times also been sending somewhat confusing signals, perhaps reflecting the understandable political situation in the country overall, especially in the run-up to what looks to be a contentious presidential and congressional election in May 2004.

Unfortunately, Mindanao's festering problems just cannot wait. Dr Mahathir, a key regional player behind the scene in trying to get a handle on this nettlesome issue, retires at the end of the month. Perhaps he can be persuaded by the incoming Government to take on the truly statesman-like role of "roving ambassador" to help bring about a final peace treaty for Mindanao?

Manila also quite desperately needs at least the appearance of a peace process in Mindanao that is moving somewhere. This will help to shore up President Arroyo as she fights a difficult battle for re-election.

The Philippine President is at least conscious of the fact that Mindanao currently offers simultaneously a serious political problem as well as an excellent opportunity to once and for all put the country right.

US President George W. Bush is making a stop-over in Manila on his current Asian swing to highlight the promise of a big carrot for Mindanao's development once peace is attained. Japan and other Western countries have made similar offers of assistance.

If peace is eventually attained for Mindanao, it will be as much a credit to all the key players - Dr Mahathir, Arroyo and Bush - who will have shown that whatever the rhetoric on the surface among them, their

constructive engagement over the Mindanao question has ultimately borne fruit.

Once Mindanao is pacified, can the answer to the seemingly insurmountable challenge that is Iraq be far behind? It could be a role truly worthy of Dr Mahathir - and there is nothing the Muslim world needs more desperately than a hard-charging, result-oriented Muslim statesman right now.