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Answer terror with courage

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HERE in Algiers on an official visit, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad told his hosts on Monday that "Muslim countries must unite to defend our image. The perception of Islam as a religion that promotes acts of terror must be corrected. Both Algeria and Malaysia share a common position in the fight against terrorism."

Just as I finished last week's column - in which I ventured to suggest that Saudi Arabia had some explaining to do in the worldwide outbreak of Islamic extremism - a suicide bomb exploded at the JW Marriott Hotel in Jakarta, killing 11 and wounding more than 150.

Indonesia responded quickly, leading me to believe that it is making steady progress against Islamic militancy after a long spell of denial. But many people, including some wobbly-kneed commentators in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, went scurrying for the nearest klaxon, warning direly of a region-wide terrorist infrastructure ready to strike at any moment.

Present-day terrorism's emphasis on soft targets is precisely calculated to produce such an effect. One thing I look upon with dismay (and there are many) in the US-led war on terror is the jostling crowd of twosens, impromptu experts, hacks and talking heads getting more than their 15 minutes of CNN or local fame at the sound of every bomb.

Terrorism succeeds according to how much bigger it can portray itself than it really is. The most strident wolf-criers are thus part of the thinking terrorist's armoury, playing into his bloodied hands in the psychological battle for hearts and minds.

Indeed, some of the more insightful writers on terrorism in the West have described the damage done to national and individual psyches. This is where the fight must really be waged. The sheer number of suspects rounded up from Dubai to Denpasar, or the retributive cruelty of legirons in the concentration camp of Guantanamo Bay, can only offer superficial and misleading comfort.

Terrorism operates on climate - every interdiction can be doubly countered by a bomb, a stone-throwing protest plus a taped warning by an al-Qaeda spokesman on Al-Jazeera for good measure.

Fear and frustration distort truth. Ultimately, success or failure in the war on terror depends on how many people are taken in by the likes of Amrozi Nurhasyim, the Bali bomber convicted and sentenced to death last week, when he jubilantly asserted that many thousands would take his place in the cause of martyrdom.

The Western media played up his fisted salutes and shouts of "Allahu Akbar". It only made matters worse and gladdened the hearts of the would-be suicide bombers.

Amrozi's bravado and believability is built on his withering contempt for the cowardice of his enemies and victims. The answer to him and the rest of the hell-bent Jemaah Islamiyah is courage. Terrorism can only be defeated in the long run when there is a large and compelling enough body of people determined to get on with their lives, in peace, harmony, dignity and hope, come what may.

The crux to fighting terrorism, then, is to secure such a large and compelling body of people, a polity with a stake in a system of government whose vision of the future can elicit bravery in its defence.

This was Malaysia's essential victory in the 1948 to 1960 communist insurgency. Its lessons have been lasting, at least with the security

services. Only time, the subjects and situations have changed; the blueprint, perhaps modified a little to suit circumstances, hasn't.

Politics was also the solution to the long-running troubles in Northern Ireland and every other insurrection you might care to mention, as British Prime Minister Tony Blair well knows whenever he can take his eye off the rampaging posterior of American foreign policy.

He recognises how important it is to find a peaceful settlement to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - a running sore in the perceived injury inflicted on Islam by the Western powers and exploited by extremists as a call to arms.

Contrary to proven experience of the political dimension of terrorism, the international war against it has been high on tactics and low on strategy. Addressing the Asia-Pacific Roundtable two days after the Jakarta attack last Thursday, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi spoke of the hydra-headed nature of militancy fuelled by unrelenting grievance.

"Terrorism is not a scourge that is easily wiped out. We can make life very difficult for terrorist elements, we can scatter them, cut off one head here and a tentacle there. But often the beast survives," he said.

"To successfully defeat the terrorist, one needs to know what makes his heart beat and what feeds his anger. It is here that counter-terrorist operations globally still fall short. We deliberately refuse even to discuss the causes, or we would rather be selective, highlighting the alleged faults of others and closing discourse on the seeds of terror that we ourselves help sow."

It is simply not enough to crack down on the militants and their sympathisers. An unvarying policy of locking them behind bars is only a short step away from outright repression. Without political solutions to root causes, the tactics themselves can lead to unbearably worse.

We saw it in military-ruled Latin America, where tactics rather than strategy were employed to make the political opposition disappear. We see it in Israel, whose democratic government condones a junta-like suppression of Palestinian aspirations. The fragile ceasefire was given another blow with the explosions of two bombs yesterday, one at a shopping mall northeast of Tel Aviv and the other in the West Bank settlement of Ariel.

And we have seen it here in Algeria, which has had a long history of Islamic resistance, first against the French colonialists and then a succession of secular authoritarian regimes after independence in 1962.

In 1992, the army cancelled elections in which the Islamic Salvation Front (FIS) were poised to win. FIS activists were arrested and jailed, and their party banned. By mid-1999, 100,000 people were said to have been killed in the violence that ensued. Later that year, the Islamic Salvation Army, the armed wing of the FIS, renounced its armed struggle on a promise of amnesty.

In January 2000, President Abdelaziz Bouteflika granted a blanket pardon and the Government soon announced that most of the Islamic guerillas had surrendered. Violence has greatly diminished since then, and is largely confined to rural areas.

I have been in and around Algiers for the last three days in spite of my Algerian driver's caution against going too far out of the capital. Everything looks secure for the time being.

Algeria reminds us that Islam often provides the only means of resistance or opposition to tyranny. This is why the current Indonesian ruling elite took so long to concede the existence of and distance itself from the Islamist militants, whose stand against the Suharto regime was part of the country's reformasi.

The Government of President Megawati Sukarnoputri has changed tack since the Bali bombings last November, but the question of root causes remains. To reach these causes, Indonesia must first get its house in order - particularly in seeking a political resolution to the conflict in Aceh, said to be the most devout region in the world's largest Muslim country.

The absence of strategy is reflected in distraction and exaggeration, not just by pro-American partisans and commentators enlarging the threat of terrorism, but in the waging of the war itself.

I have always maintained that the invasion of Iraq has been a huge diversion in the war on terror. The American occupation of Iraq has caused instability and stoked resistance, exactly the sort of thing that enlivens Muslim extremists facing their own oppression, real or imagined, across the globe.

What I like about Algiers is that, though it is Muslim, it is progressive. Substance, not form, matters more here. I have rarely seen women wearing veils or scarves and men in white skullcaps. They are the exception rather than the rule.

Algeria and Malaysia, I should think, must continue to deploy modernisation, progressive Islam and good governance to fight mediaeval and harsh Wahhabism and its offshoots, which Riyadh is determined to export. In Algeria, there is talk in intellectual circles of the probability of an alliance between the Islamists and Berber anti-government organisations. Perhaps, in Malaysia as well as in Algeria, moderate forces must beware of the politics of convenience.