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Brewing a storm in a teacup

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BANGKOK has a much longer history of entertaining foreign leaders and tourists than we have. I first attended an international conference here in the early 1960s and still recall the hospitality. We have, in 46 years, learned fast and can be as proud as the Thais.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad stole the show on the first day of the Apec Summit here. Circumspect though he might be, he got as much coverage, if not more, than the world's chief police constable. He got two editorials, some commentary and a front-page exclusive interview in the local English language papers. All were admiring, if somewhat grudgingly.

Top cop President George W. Bush won a headline for purportedly forcing reluctant Apec leaders to agree to deal with terrorism as well as trade and everything.

I dare say that last week's OIC Summit in Putrajaya, the first conclave of Muslim nations since the Sept 11 attacks, showed a degree of unity not seen since the 1970s.

There was then a resolute solidarity and the means with which to express it: oil. The Arab oil-producing countries launched an embargo to punish Israel for the Yom Kippur War of 1973, which pushed the world economy into recession. It was a blow designed to hit the Jewish state and its supporters where it hurt most - their pockets.

But the "oil shock" didn't work, at least not for very long. Consumer countries, both rich and poor, resisted and tried to wangle their way out from being held hostage by the oil weapon.

Ever since, the aura of failure has stuck to the OIC like a blue funk, with Muslim leaders left wondering how to fight back without, in the long run, endangering their own economic and political interests. For sure, the Arabs cannot vanquish Israel militarily, and the inability to square this with the imperative of obtaining justice for the Palestinians is what keeps the Middle East in turmoil, its regimes insecure and the Muslim world in perpetual anger.

The answer to fighting back was proposed by Dr Mahathir at the opening of the summit, in what I thought was a momentous speech. He appealed to his fellow Muslim countries to free themselves from the trap of failure by an effort of will.

He bemoaned the collective psychosis of defeat, which has led to a widespread toleration of the tactical value of suicide bombing in a struggle for liberation. Terrorism was futile and wrong, he said. To win anything resembling justice from the Jews in a world where might is right, one has no choice but to be as strong and clever as they are.

The upshot of the speech was not in the fingerpointing at Jews as the enemy of Muslims. There is nothing new in that, for the Zionists feel the same way about their Muslim neighbours, if not Islam as a whole.

Dr Mahathir did not draw a line between Muslim and Jew or anyone else, but presented the irrefutable argument that the foes of Islam could not be fought by violence from a position of weakness.

From the outset and for over three decades, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been the OIC's *raison d'etre*, with scant and even retrograde results. The hosting of the 10th Summit in Kuala Lumpur, a capital of Islamic moderation and pluralism, was a signal for the 57-member grouping to move beyond the defining issue of Palestine and revive the ummah on a

larger scale.

It was time, perhaps, to practise the art of losing the battle in order to win the war. Though the tragedy of Palestine cannot be forsaken, the effort to reclaim it must be fought on a broader front.

The atrocity of the Sept 11 attacks has, rightly or wrongly, put the Muslim community and its leadership in the dock. "We cannot say we cannot do anything, we the leaders of the Muslim nations. We cannot say we cannot unite even when faced with the destruction of our religion and the ummah. We know we can," the Prime Minister said.

Indeed, we must - by first abjuring the modes of violence that provoke disproportionate responses and keep Muslims, particularly the Arabs, in continual retreat.

True to form, gross disproportion greeted Dr Mahathir's address. The knee-jerk outrage of Western politicians, who employed a thesaurus of denunciations, was yet another display of the odds stacked against the Palestinians and their Muslim brothers and sisters. As often as I've heard it, I am always surprised by the West's denial over Palestine, by the weight of historical guilt for their own murderous anti-Semitism.

One need only read US presidential memoirs during the last five decades to realise the American leadership's hypocrisy. The larger hypocrisy of the West's desire to atone for past sins and their blindness to the oppression of the Palestinians never ceases to amaze me.

Indeed, French President Jacques Chirac wrote to Dr Mahathir on Sunday to say that his views on Jewish influence could only be condemned by those who remember the Nazi holocaust. No one can deny that the Jews have gone a long way to making sure that it is never forgotten.

Israel is doing some finger-pointing of its own, accusing Chirac of blocking a European Union condemnation of Dr Mahathir's comments. As Bush and his Secretary of State Colin Powell took up the cudgels on behalf of the Jews at Apec this week, the Prime Minister was proved correct in very short order.

"I think President Chirac understands better. Anybody who reads the entire speech will understand what I said," the Prime Minister said. "I'm glad that Chirac at least understands. I would like to thank him publicly."

In a salute to their new-found unity, the leaders and delegates at the OIC in Putrajaya rallied behind Dr Mahathir. Even the quietly pro-Western Afghan President Hamid Karzai scoffed at the charge that the speech was anti-Jewish. I was disappointed by the OIC's waffling over Iraq, but encouraged by its support for what needed to be said, and heard across the world.

What needs to be heard by ears unused to listening is the scourge of inequality and what ought to be done about it - and not just where Muslims are concerned. The collapse of the World Trade Organisation talks at Cancun on Sept 14 demonstrated that in order to try to balance the scales, poor countries have been pushed into saying "no" in unison, even if it proves to their eventual detriment. It is continuing inequality that sets back the liberalisation of trade and corners disfranchised minorities into acts of foolish defiance, including terrorism.

The Pyrrhic victory of the developing countries at Cancun was in the assertion that the cause of global free trade will not be advanced without an equitable distribution of its benefits. Apec, which was formed by the US in 1989 to take the wind out of the sails of Dr Mahathir's proposal for an East Asian Economic Caucus, could fall flat sooner if it fails to deliver on its promise by taking on the added burden of Washington's national security issues.

As the Institute for International Economics has pointed out, Dr

Mahathir's vision of East Asian economic intergration may be alive and well, after all. Asean is moving forward to free up trade with China, Japan and South Korea. Southeast Asia, at this month's Bali Summit, has resolved as a unit to turn itself into an economic community in the style of the European common market.

Apec's future may not then matter much and will matter even less if the US elects to ruin the atmosphere at the Bangkok Summit by insisting that its concerns be shared by all.

At the Apec conference, I was asked by American journalists about Dr Mahathir's speech. I said Dr Mahathir was rather conciliatory, much more so than the robed or suited Muslim leaders at the OIC. Besides, quite honestly, isn't the American rhetoric also biased? As always, Dr Mahathir is always misunderstood. It is important and only fair to keep a proper sense of proportion when interpreting or reacting to him.

The West, Chirac aside, raised the stakes, used undiplomatic language and made implied threats. This makes it seem - even if wrongly - that the West has something to hide. Leaders display weakness if they overreact unreasonably.

Some people make far too much of it when they or their friends are attacked. They aren't showing a lot of coolness.

The Muslims did not react when Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi said "Muslims are terrorists". Did the European Union or Australia try to condemn the statement? And did Bush refer to the Italian gaffe as "wrong and divisive - it stands squarely against what I believe in"? No, they didn't and, truthfully, it didn't matter to Muslims because it's not true, anyway.