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Bright and breezy future

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IF the world has been described as a small place and borderless in many aspects, events in the recent past have only emphasised its magnitude and how a peaceful nation like Malaysia can be affected.

The lives of Malaysians were disrupted with scenes of carnage following the invasion of Iraq by United States-led coalition forces in late March.

People were tiring of violence and aggression.

If demonstrations and anti-war protests were also done by Malaysians through movements such as the People's Alliance for Peace Malaysia (Peace or Aman Malaysia), there was little Malaysians could do to ward off the devastating effects of the outbreak of the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome.

Malaysia had five probable SARS cases, which was 0.06 per cent of the number reported globally. There were two deaths.

All five cases were categorised as imported, that is, victims contracting the disease during their visits to other countries.

However, like other countries in the region, Malaysia saw its airline industry and hospitality sector being dealt a severe blow.

Also unspared were businesses, many of which are recovering and taking steps to ensure there is an uptrend during the second half of the year.

The sweep of the pneumonia-like virus across 30 countries, most of them in East Asia, killed 813 people from 8,437 infections before it was declared contained in July by the World Health Organisation.

However, the health scare it whipped up savaged the region's multi-billion-dollar travel industry, with people preferring to stay home instead of exposing themselves to the risk of infection by the disease, which still has no known antidote.

Lessons are learnt and the medical profession locally and globally is trying to develop surveillance mechanisms that will quickly detect cases ahead of any possible resurgence.

There are plans for Malaysia to head and co-ordinate a network of laboratories of the Asean+3 (Japan, China and Korea) countries to enhance regional surveillance of disease outbreaks and set up an early warning system among the 13 nations.

Remarkably, the recovery following SARS has been nothing short of impressive.

Flights to most tourist destinations in the country have been reported as full and airline companies are resuming flights while hotels are also poised for strong growth.

Manufacturers are also seeing a surge in new orders.

Most importantly, consumer sentiment in the country is positive, as can be seen from the response to the August Mega Sales.

Just as an antidote to the SARS virus is being sought, there is a search for an antidote to terrorism, even though some quarters think that it rests on global co-operation.

Two years after the Sept 11 bombings in New York and Washington, the turmoil caused by terrorism still lingers on even as Malaysia continues to emphasise the need to address and eliminate its root causes.

Malaysian leaders say terrorism is not caused by the beliefs or practices of any single race or religion but due to marginalisation, oppression, injustice and retaliation by groups considered weak and marginalised.

The Bali and Jakarta bombings are incidents too close for comfort for Malaysians as people realise that the level of hatred, bitterness and frustration seem to be greater post-Sept 11. Through efforts of organised programmes such as the Kuala Lumpur World Peace Conference, a ray of hope for peace is making its way through the 21st century.

Also worthy is the Global Peace Mission, a coalition of 77 Malaysian NGOs formed in September 2001, whose core mission is to help in the reconstruction of ruined nations, with emphasis on the rehabilitation of individuals and families.

Remarkable though was the Joint Media Team Malaysia, comprising more than 40 representatives from local news organisations who covered the invasion of Iraq and the aftermath, which decided to extend some help to Ya Yasmine Waadi, whose legs were blown off below the knee by the bombings in Baghdad.

Their initiative bore fruit as Malaysians chipped in to help this spunky nine-year-old child.

International leaders hold Malaysia in high esteem in the international scene, and have helped bridge that gap (misinterpretations) and take the lead in forging better international understanding of the Islamic world.

While Malaysia's unity in diversity also makes it worthy for other nations to emulate, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad makes it a point to remind Malaysians to make a small sacrifice for the sake of racial peace and harmony.

The winning formula of tolerance and respect for one another's culture and religion to ensure the country's progress and stability was after all promoted by Malaysia's first Prime Minister Tengku Abdul Rahman Putra, who had led the country to independence.

The setting up inter-racial clubs in educational institutions would go a long way in addressing racial polarisation.

The country's inaugural national service, which will start in February, is also looked upon as a means of creating a nation which is patriotic, resilient and imbued with the spirit of volunteerism and guided by the principles of Rukunegara.

The National Registration Department had traced 478,850 boys and girls, born in 1986, who will be eligible for the programme.

The goals of Vision 2020 may not be achieved if unhealthy elements such as pornographic videos and child abuse continue to plague society.

Just as advancement in technology had provided people with state-of-the-art communication, questions are being raised as to whether some actions such as the lafaz cerai (divorce declaration) through the short messaging system (SMS) is valid.

The Gombak syariah court's recent landmark decision considered such a declaration through SMS as valid, causing a public stir.

However, the Cabinet said that it would not be right for Malaysian Muslim men to divorce their wives by merely sending text messages, saying it not only humiliated women but also tarnished the image of Islam and syariah law.

Malaysians have been reminded that it is incumbent upon them to know the dangers of corruption and bribery and to avoid them.

Local authorities must carry out their duties without fear or favour and show accountability even as residents stand up and demand better service from them.

The Government's long-term plan to overcome flash floods in Kuala Lumpur were welcomed by residents.

The Government's plans to take over water management in all states in Peninsular Malaysia is also considered a wise move to ensure uninterrupted quality and adequate water supply to consumers.

