

31/05/2003

Collateral damage and the precious life of all

Rizal Andalas

IN the last few days, focus has been on an address made by the United States Ambassador in Malaysia Marie T. Huhtala on the way forward for US-Malaysia relations.

Her speech is carried in full on the embassy's website. The ambassador deserves warm praise not only for focusing on what can be done to improve relations, but also for her positive suggestions.

I think it would be easy for the Malaysian Government to welcome the suggestions. The suggestions are that Malaysia mobilise support among NAM and OIC members to participate in humanitarian and reconstruction efforts in Iraq; that Malaysia support the quartet's road-map for peace in the Middle East; and that it continue to pursue a free trade agreement with the US, and explore other ways as well to expand trade between the two economies.

It would be easier for Malaysia to mobilise NAM and the OIC behind the humanitarian and reconstruction efforts in Iraq if the entire interim administration of post-Saddam Iraq were in the hands of the rightful international authority, the UN, and not the illegal occupying powers, specifically the United States.

But "co-ordination" by a UN Special Representative in specific areas is better than none, and the over-riding urgency of providing humanitarian assistance should impel Malaysia to rally NAM and OIC support.

Similarly, the roadmap is tilted towards Israeli interests, and the original US draft was even more so. But it represents a real compromise and the Palestinians, and now Israel, have accepted the plan though with some conditions.

Kuala Lumpur should, therefore, push for NAM and OIC support in this area too if the initiative continues to hold.

These opportunities provide tangible hope for an improvement in US-Malaysia relations.

As regards the existing strains, Huhtala states that what upset the US was public castigation of the US "in antagonistic, occasionally offensive, terms".

The US was particularly upset with reference to "the victims of the Sept 11 terrorist attacks as mere 'collateral damage', and irritated by allegations that the US was pursuing a war against Islam, a policy based on racism and an effort to dominate the world."

Malaysia's opposition to the US-led invasion of Iraq was not in itself a problem. She concedes that many countries around the world were opposed too.

Just as I went into the US Embassy site, I went into the Prime Minister's Department's site and studied his speech carefully.

I think if the US understood what Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir really wanted to say about "collateral damage" they would be less upset.

"Collateral damage" was a term coined by the US to describe the unintended victims of their attacks.

Dr Mahathir asks, if you can call those who died in Afghanistan and Iraq collaterals, aren't those who died in New York also collaterals? Why can the term be used for others but not Americans? Is this not racism?

The point he was trying to make however, was that none of them, neither American nor non-American, should be called collaterals.

All of them deserve respect. He specifically says: "Actually, the life

of any human being is sacred, no matter if the person is a friend or an enemy". Why can't Washington understand that this is the real point? Is it because they really think that American lives are superior?

It is difficult for Malaysia, under whichever prime minister, to condone what the US is doing in Iraq. Domestic sentiment in this democracy would not allow it. Malaysia's commitment to a world order under-pinned by adherence to international law and international norms would not permit it.

The majority in the UN Security Council was against it. The overwhelming majority of nations in the General Assembly opposed it. The bulk of humanity was against it. Only in Israel was there majority popular support.

The latest statements expressing concern and alarm are from the leaders of China, Russia and the US's closest neighbour Canada, which shared many of America's seemingly lost ideals. They cannot be all wrong.

Malaysia must express its views, and as the US Ambassador asserts, this should not be the problem.

But perhaps it will also be good if some of the rhetoric is left to civil society and the people of Malaysia to express it. States are subject to all kinds of constraints and considerations. The people are not.

They must come to the fore, and assume the leadership of the struggle to defend international law and the international order against the excesses of overwhelming power.