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Gap of silence in anti-war consensus

THE Prime Minister is disappointed that Qatar, current chairman of the Organisation of Islamic Conference, is reluctant to call an emergency OIC session to discuss the threat of war in Iraq. As Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad pointed out, with so many OIC heads of government attending the Feb 20-25 Non-Aligned Movement Summit, it would have been opportune to meet in Kuala Lumpur. But Qatar apparently plans to hold one in Doha only after the summit.

It is not hard to see why. Although their people are opposed to American policy towards Iraq, some Arab government are trying not to antagonise their powerful political and economic ally. However, unlike most of its Arab neighbours who have hedged their positions by supporting diplomatic solutions and holding back from offering military assistance, Qatar - together with Kuwait and Turkey - has allowed the United States to use its military bases for attacks on Iraq.

While the imminence of war has galvanised millions around the world to support peace and strengthened the voices in the United Nations Security Council against the American position, the voice of the Arab world has been muted, both inside the corridors of the UN and outside on the streets. There seems a resignation, not only to war, but also to not taking a position between US President George W. Bush and Iraqi President Saddam Hussein. Unlike the rest of the world, the Arabs have confined their initiatives to gentle pressure on Iraq to comply with UN disarmament resolutions and avoid trouble.

In calling for a meeting of OIC members on the sidelines of NAM, Malaysia has demonstrated that like most of the world it will not submit to the inevitability of war. Millions of demonstrators in the US, Britain and Australia are trying to change the minds of their leaders. The anti-war positions of the French, German and Belgian governments have popular support. Hundreds of thousands of signatures have been collected by the Malaysians for Peace movement. The next few weeks are vital. As long as there is a chance of averting military conflict, those opposed to war must continue to make their voices heard. This will no doubt be heard loud and clear at the NAM Summit and the OIC meeting in Kuala Lumpur.

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