

31/08/2003

Glowing international status

A. Kathirasen

WHEN leaders of some of the world's top nations come for official visits, it can mean only one thing: The nation being visited is an important player in world affairs.

Within the space of four months this year, Russian President Vladimir Putin, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder and French President Jacques Chirac came to Kuala Lumpur.

That itself is evidence that Malaysia has not only arrived but is a major player in the international arena.

However, if that is not enough, then add to it the fact that leaders of other nations keep expressing an admiration for the country and its Prime Minister. Add the fact that international fora and events take place in the country - such as the summit of the Non-Aligned Movement and the forthcoming summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Countries - and there is no gain-saying the evidence.

Some of the leaders of other nations have not been shy to admit that they admire Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad or that they want to learn from Malaysia's experience. One such person is Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra. Another is Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey.

Then of course, there are the invitations to visit from heads of many nations piling up on Dr Mahathir's desk.

Malaysia's advice is sought; its help solicited. When Dr Mahathir speaks, leaders of other nations pay attention. Whether they agree or not, they listen.

There is no denying that Dr Mahathir's words and actions are the major reason for this world recognition. However, Malaysians can feel proud that their willingness and ability to live in amity while increasing economic productivity has had a good effect on the standing of Malaysia in the eyes of the world. This stability and progress have given Dr Mahathir a solid base from which to be bold and loud.

The number of leaders of other nations visiting Kuala Lumpur has been on the increase in recent years. The country has had visits from heads of major powers such as China and India. Malaysia continues to have visits from leaders of developing and less-developed countries.

However, the recent visits of the leaders of Russia, Germany and France are certainly more than a feather in the cap.

Putin's two-day visit was significant: it was the first by a Russian head of state to Malaysia.

He presented Dr Mahathir with Russia's highest state award - the Order of Friendship (Order of Friendship) - in recognition of the latter's efforts at strengthening bilateral relations and his contribution to "developing the system of international relations founded on a just distribution of the benefits that globalisation offers".

Schroeder's visit in May enhanced bilateral relations and endorsed the voice of moderation that Malaysia is associated with. Chirac's visit, although brief, underlined the common stand of the two nations on world issues.

All these countries appreciated Kuala Lumpur's call for multilateralism and for the United Nations to remain relevant.

While urging for a reform of the UN, Malaysia feels no nation should ride roughshod over others. Kuala Lumpur has shouted down adventurism and

unilateralism. It has rebuked those who think might is right.

Dr Mahathir is not one to mince his words. In July, he said Myanmar might be expelled from the Association of South East Asian Nations as a last resort if the ruling junta failed to release opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi.

This reminder to Yangon comes from the very man who helped push its membership into the 10-nation grouping over criticism from other nations.

It has also to be noted that the UN Secretary-General's Special Envoy for Myanmar is none other than Tan Sri Razali Ismail, who has been playing a pivotal role in attempts to get the junta and Suu Kyi to resume talks.

Dr Mahathir recently urged leaders of East Asian nations to stop "hiding" behind the Asean+3 formation and admit that there is a need to establish the East Asian Economic Grouping (EAEG). He called for the formalisation of the EAEG.

Saying it would be better not to rely entirely on one currency, he has initiated a revolutionary move to use the Gold Dinar for international trade settlements, adding that developing nations needed to create their own trading currency to defend against currency speculation.

In opening the 13th Non-Aligned Movement Summit in February, Dr Mahathir called for, among other things, the creation of "a New World Order where power is shared by all nations". Malaysia is the chairman of NAM.

He lashed out at the West for what he called its "revival of the old European trait of wanting to dominate the world".

The NAM summit was one of the biggest, if not the biggest, in terms of the participating heads of government and state. And everyone had only praise for the excellent organisational skills demonstrated.

At a oneday extraordinary sum-mit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference here, Dr Mahathir said: "The OIC's voice has not been shown due consideration because we have failed to speak with one voice."

Many see Malaysia as the moderate face of Islam. Kuala Lumpur will assume the chairmanship of the 56-nation OIC and host the 10th OIC Summit in October.

OIC secretary-general Dr Abde-louahed Belkeziz said recently he was confident that the summit would be a landmark in the OIC's history and that it would result in important decisions for the good of the ummah.

Malaysia has also been playing the role of mediator in the festering problem between the Philippine Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front.

Recently, the Philippine Government and MILF officials asked Malaysia and several other countries to speed up the despatch of monitors to observe a ceasefire in the south. Malaysia has been hosting the Manila-MILF peace talks in Kuala Lumpur for several years now.

However, not everything is rosy about Malaysia's relationship with the United States and Singapore. Kuala Lumpur has spoken out against certain positions and actions of the US and this has not gone down well with the George W. Bush administration.

There were reports in March the US threatened Malaysia with diplomatic and economic reprisals for apparently "fanning anti-American sentiment" with its opposition to the war in Iraq.

However, Washington did not go through with the threat when it was made clear to it by Kuala Lumpur that Malaysia was not against the US but against the war in Iraq which was led by the US.

Although both sides say the relationship is good, it is not as warm as that, say, between Malaysia and France or Malaysia and Thailand.

And, of course, Kuala Lumpur's love-hate relationship with Singapore continues. The National Economic Action Council (NEAC) placed several advertisements in local newspapers and a regional newspaper to inform

people about the Malaysian side of the story. It also came out with a booklet, Water: The Singapore-Malaysia Dispute - The Facts.

This followed the earlier release of a booklet by Singapore entitled Water Talks: If Only it Could, which was widely distributed.

The numbers presented by the NEAC showed Malaysia was at the losing end and that the current price structure needed to be revised. The Malaysian ads claimed that Singapore made a profit by buying cheap from Malaysia and selling it at a higher price to Singaporeans.

Singapore replied by taking out advertisements in several newspapers to counter the Malaysian charges. "Singapore is still ready to resolve the matter in accordance with the terms of the Water Agreements," said the advertisement.

The water dispute is not expected to end soon and some officials have expressed the fear that Singapore's stand could further erode Malaysia-Singapore ties.

Fortunately, the bridge over troubled waters has not collapsed and there is hardly any problem at the people-to-people level.

So, despite the water fight with Singapore and the Bush administrations's disillusionment with Kuala Lumpur for not saying "Hail fellow, well met" all the time, our relationship with the rest of the world is, simply put, terrific.