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No better way to revitalise NAM than to help save lives

Ahmad A. Talib

IN his dark blue police uniform, Suffian stands guard at one of the entrances to the Putra World Trade Centre, the venue for the 13th Summit of the Non-Aligned Movement.

Suffian and his colleagues went through a thorough training routine weeks before the summit, and they now appear very alert in their job.

When I walked in, Suffian was sizing me from head to toe. Being the gentle person that I am, and with the proper accreditation tag, I was allowed into the International Media Centre to begin work.

The centre is full of media people - local and foreign, men and women, journalists and photographers.

Finally, it's here. The Non-Aligned Movement's 13th Summit that is.

For diplomats and political observers, NAM is no stranger to them. In seeking a just and peaceful world, NAM leaders meet in our federal capital amidst mounting tension over the possibility of war over Iraq.

Detractors of NAM may say that the summit, which started with a meeting among senior officials on Thursday, is nothing more than a talk show - an opinion often expressed whenever there's a big conference or convention. But as everyone knows, there are talk shows and talk shows.

This particular talk show, however, is an extremely important one. And NAM leaders must continue their talk in a frank manner as the movement tries to revitalise itself amid an increasingly unipolar world.

At the media lounge, journalists huddle together for the much-needed caffeine, and maybe grab a quick lunch while discussing the issues facing NAM leaders.

There's talk among some quarters that NAM seems to be giving too much attention to Iraq, as if other issues do not exist or are not as important.

It's a matter of perception really. I would like to think that the impending war on Iraq is the burning issue of the day, and that every peace-loving person is worried and concerned that war in the Gulf may trigger a bigger war against the rest of the world.

With millions all over the world wanting peace and trying to urge American President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair to drop the idea of a military strike on Iraq, surely NAM leaders can see how pressing the issue is. If NAM wants to revitalise itself, there's no better issue than the on-going effort to save the lives of thousands, maybe even millions, of innocent people.

Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi articulated this concern when he addressed NAM ministers yesterday.

Abdullah called on NAM to change the world order by rejecting unilateralism. Failure to do so, Pak Lah said, would result in NAM members being marginalised and "our aim of creating a more just and secure world unfulfilled".

As the host, and having covered other world conferences and summits elsewhere, I would like to think that the secretariat has done a good job in handling and managing the summit so far.

The personal attention by host and incoming chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has put everyone on the alert, particularly the likes of Suffian and his colleagues.

It's unlikely that we are going to host NAM again, but it's a good forerunner to October's Organisation of Islamic Conference meeting.

We are forever on a learning curve, but I would like to think we are doing very well where logistics and administration are concerned.

But as I said earlier in previous commentaries, the test for NAM is whether it can speak with one voice, and speak confidently without fear or favour.

It is incumbent upon NAM and its leaders to send a clear signal to the rest of the world that unilateralism is not the solution to universal problems. Indeed, unilateralism can spark or trigger new problems or even disasters.

NAM cannot stand in silence with hands folded while the Palestinians are still denied their rights to full self-determination, and not bring North Korea to meaningful constructive engagement in the light of that country's nuclear capabilities.

Stand up and say your piece, NAM!