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I am a Muslim fundamentalist but not a terrorist, says Dr M

Ahmad A. Talib

IT was obvious that participants to the ninth Nikkei conference here came to hear the views of the man many regard as the Voice of Asia - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

His frank answers and opinions on issues affecting Asia and the rest of the world met with warm responses from the floor as they clapped each time he answered their questions. Some of them may have heard the rhetoric before while others heard them for the first time.

It was quite apparent that they enjoyed listening to him. Earlier, he had taken to the rostrum and shared his thoughts on "Genesis of a new Asia Order".

In that speech, he said that Asia should adapt democratic principles gradually and consolidate its economy on sound policies and regimes.

After the talk, Dr Mahathir joined Philippines President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo, Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra and former Japanese Prime Minister Ryutaro Hashimoto for a roundtable discussion on the future of Asia.

The first question directed at him was how would he, as a leader of a Muslim-majority country and who has devoted his life to promote Islam and bring modernisation to Malaysia, deal with the question of Islamic militancy.

His response was direct and simple. "It is quite easy for me to answer that because I am a Muslim fundamentalist.

"If you go back to the actual teachings of Islam, you don't cause problem to yourself and to others because Islam advocates peace and brotherhood not only among Muslims but to others as well. It also advocates non-violence unless you are attacked by others. These are the fundamentals of Islam.

"But over 1,400 years, there have been many interpretations of Islam by people who harbour certain interests. This has also happened to the Christian religion.

"Every now and then some people deviate from the true teachings and interpretation of Islam. What is happening now is that some people, out of frustration and anger, decided to stir up religious feelings and claim that what they are doing is taught by Islam. Actually, it is politics..."

He drew the audience's attention to the mislabelling of Islam as promoting terrorism. He told them not to make the mistake of linking a political reaction which may be violent to a particular situation (such as taking away of land to create a new State like Israel).

When Palestinian land was taken to create Israel, the Palestinians were very angry as they were expelled from their homeland. Some Muslim leaders then interpreted this as a permit to carry out a war against Israel, he said.

He pointed out that certain sections of the world media continued to link Islam to terrorism. He drew applause when he said that there is no labelling of Christian terrorists such as Protestant terrorists or Catholic terrorists in Northern Ireland, Buddhist terrorists, Hindu terrorists or Sikh terrorists in India even when they are involved in acts of violence.

He remarked that the problems of terrorism can be addressed by getting to the root cause of the problems. "Really, what is the principal problem? The principal problem is that some Muslims feel they have been deprived of

their rights and thrown out of their country and are badly treated.

"Because of that, they rebel against the rest of the world. If the reasons are removed as they are trying to do now in Palestine, and find out why Palestine cannot have their own State, then we may have peace."

He said that "if you cannot overcome that, and give Palestinians their State and their rights, and instead retaliate by destroying whole villages and families of those suspected of being a terrorist, I am quite sure they will be prone to acts of terror.

"This act of terror has got nothing to do with Islam and Islamic fundamentalism. If it is something to do with Islamic fundamentalism, then I would be a terrorist in my own country. But I believe in the fundamental teachings of Islam that we should live in peace.

"If you want to link them with religion, link all of them with every religion. Otherwise, please don't link Islam with terrorism. We are not terrorists. I am not a terrorist..."

Dr Mahathir was also asked for his views on the North Korean situation after it opted out of the Non-Proliferation Nuclear Treaty. He said there is also a tendency to label countries as "rogue countries" and he feared that if countries are labelled "rogue countries" they might eventually become one.

He believed that North Korea should be engaged in discussions instead of threatening them. It had acceded to the non-proliferation treaty on the condition that others help them. North Korea went back to its nuclear programmes when help was not forthcoming.

"I suggest that instead of threatening them with punishment, why don't we talk to them. They are willing to talk and let's find out why they are doing this. Let's do something about it."

There were also questions addressed to Arroyo and Thaksin who responded with their individual flair and style. Of the two, Thaksin seemed to enjoy articulating his views in particular when he was asked to elaborate on the proposed Asian Bond Market.

All three leaders were also asked to comment on the future economy of Asia and how each of them would work around the American and European dominance in this area. All three agreed that Japan has a big role to play in Asia's economic future.

At one point, Dr Mahathir was asked whether he has been more moderate and less aggressive in his views. Demonstrating a sense of humour, he quipped: "Not exactly, I've held on these beliefs for a long time. If I sound milder, maybe its due to old age..."