

08/02/2003

In praise of ships of the desert and their seemingly unworthy masters

Shamsul Akmar

THE Bedouins name camels "Ata Allah" which means God's gift.

An established local financial institution uses the camel as its mascot, obviously because the mammal is dependable, sturdy, patient, good-tempered, intelligent and has a high level of perseverance.

It could also be that CAMEL is the abbreviation of a financial concept representing capital adequacy, asset quality, management efficiency, earning performance and liquidity ratio.

Another reason for the institution's choice of the camel as a mascot must have been the fact that it had an Arab partner when it was established in 1975.

While the camel had given the institution a respectable identity in most of its dealings, it seems to have somehow degenerated in its practice of repossessing vehicles from delinquent debtors.

In a recent incident, such a debtor on his way home at midnight had his vehicle forced off a road by a car carrying a group of repossessors who seemed to subscribe to the idea that intimidation is the only way to do business. Since the repossessors were acting on behalf of the institution, it gave the impression that the established institution indulges in activities akin to those practised by the much-feared "Ah Long" loan sharks.

But a call to the head of the institution's corporate affairs division saved the debtor from further intimidation.

Alas, the ugly side of camels - bad-tempered, kicking, biting and spitting - rarely exhibited by the animals - had marred the image of the institution.

However, this should not imply that the positive sides of camels, the pride of the Arab world, should be dismissed outright.

It is, however, quite beguiling that as much as the camel is revered by the Arabs because of its nature, the Arabs themselves do not seem to emulate the finer points this ship of the desert possesses.

Scientific research by the Wild Camel Protection Foundation showed that camels have unique physiology to thrive in some of the world's harshest environments. They can withstand dehydration due to their ability to store more water in the body, apart from their ability to go without food for extended periods. In short, camels are self-sustaining.

If only the Arabs can be like the camels.

The Arabs have survived in the harsh desert climate yet are dependent upon and, to a certain degree, are lackeys of the West or, more specifically, the United States.

The state of affairs in the Middle East, the domain of the Arabs, is pathetic especially when the Arabs are probably facing the most defining moment in their history.

If Washington and war-crazed President George W. Bush proceed with plans to attack Iraq and the Palestinians continue to be annihilated by the terrorist Tel Aviv regime, there will be neither pride nor dignity left in the Arabs in the eyes of the rest of the world.

Of course, there is the Arab League and, on a bigger though less parochial platform, the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) which are supposed to be unifying the Arabs and Muslims from other parts of the world to strive for unity and co-operation.

But realities indicate otherwise.

Both entities are almost insignificant and ineffective in terms of global participation.

Former Finance Minister Tun Daim Zainuddin, in a two-part article, wrote in Utusan Malaysia of how effective the Arabs could be if only they were united.

"The success of the Arabs in their oil embargo in 1973 was because they were united."

The proposal of using oil as a weapon to uphold the dignity and pride of the Arabs and Muslims had also been suggested by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

But the problem lies with the Arab leaders themselves.

This was pointed out by Daim in his article of the baffling guarantee by Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (Opec) in November last year that it would not use oil as a weapon.

"Saudi Arabia was the first to give the guarantee. And the latest move by Opec is to increase output."

It is a known fact that the US is affected by the oil crisis in Venezuela and if an oil embargo is imposed, it will face a crisis of its own.

It then brings back to the suspicions that the US insistence on attacking Iraq has nothing to do with the weapons of mass destruction or the need to remove President Saddam Hussein per se. It is about economics and oil and Iraq has the biggest reserves.

That established, the only problem is whether Washington cares.

At the rate things are going, it doesn't as it knows that the Arabs will not raise much of a protest if it proceeds with the attacks on Iraq.

It is an irony that when the rest of the world is rallying together to oppose US plans to attack Iraq and the continuing murders of Palestinians by the Tel Aviv regime, the Arab leaders themselves seem quite apathetic to what's happening.

To this, Umno Youth chief Datuk Hishammuddin Hussein, who initiated an anti-war campaign called Malaysians for Peace, concurred but believes such efforts are to show to the Palestinians and Iraqis that people from all over the world, regardless of race, colour or creed, are with them.

It is doubly ironic that the Arabs, believed by some to be still carrying their tribal baggage, who are of the same people and religion, are unable to come together and oppose the big bullies - the US and its allies, Britain and Australia.

The only comforting thing about the whole anti-war movement is that it is gaining momentum, with citizens from the US, Britain and Australia themselves joining hands to condemn the plans by their Governments to proceed with the military action against Iraq.

How much these anti-war efforts will achieve is anybody's guess, but the anti-war movements carried out by ordinary people from the three nations led by arrogant leaders without scruples, will extend much goodwill to citizens in other parts of the world.

But the solution to the Palestinian struggles and impending attack on Iraq is very much in the hands of the Arabs themselves, unless, Bush, Tony Blair and John Howard wake up one morning and discover they are the actual representation of the Axis of Evil and decide to change.

That is, however, very unlikely. For the powers-that-be in Washington seem to be firm believers that there are numerous ways to skin a camel and their Arab masters as well.