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Looking to KL for leadership (HL)

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PUTRAJAYA, Fri. - The 10th Organisation of the Islamic Conference Summit kicks off tomorrow, with high hopes placed on host and incoming chairman Malaysia to provide the leadership in uniting the ummah and solving issues affecting Muslims.

Senior officials from the 57-member grouping will tackle a host of issues over the next two days at the spanking Putrajaya Convention Centre as they prepare the groundwork for the Foreign Ministers' meeting and leaders' summit on Oct 16.

With the Palestinian issue topping the agenda, the summit, the first to be held in an Islamic country in the Asia-Pacific region, is expected to take a strong stand against Israeli aggression in the Middle East.

The uncertainties in Iraq, against a picture of law and order which the United States and allies promised to deliver when they invaded the country, is certain to take centre stage at the summit, themed "Knowledge and Morality for the Progress of the Ummah".

Against this backdrop, Malaysia is expected to initiate reforms to make the world's largest grouping of Islamic nations more effective in championing the Muslim agenda.

Kuala Lumpur's proposal to restructure the organisation and a review of its secretariat and its overall functions, has also received the backing of members. The changes will likely be endorsed by the leaders when they meet.

Some diplomats expressed confidence that Malaysia possessed the capability to revitalise OIC and turn it into a respected voice.

"Malaysia, with its multi-racial society, has achieved progress in various fields and is a model to many other Muslim countries.

"It proves that Muslims can be successful if they are united and work hard," said a diplomat.

The summit will be significant for Malaysia as the country assumes the chairmanship of the OIC for the next three years.

It will also serve as a fitting tribute to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who is retiring on Oct 31.

Indonesia's charge d'affaires in Malaysia, Suherman Obon, said he had confidence in the dynamic leadership of Dr Mahathir whom he described as not only a leader for Malaysia, but someone who was not afraid to lash out at injustices in the world.

With Malaysia as the host country, Suherman believed it could play a more effective role to promote the interests of members, especially the welfare and the peaceful existence of the Islamic community as well as the world.

Iranian ambassador to Malaysia Mohammad Ghasem Mohed Ali said: "In our opinion the main focus that OIC has on Malaysia is to learn its great achievements in economic development, as many Muslim countries are developing nations."

Asked if Iran had doubts on Malaysia as the host of the OIC since it was the first time, he said: "Iran is confident that Malaysia will be a good host."

Among the heads of State expected to be present are Pakistani President General Pervez Musharraf, Sudanese President Lt-Gen Omar Hassan Ahmad Al-Bashir, Bosnia Herzegovina President Sulejman Tihic and the Emir of Qatar Sheikh Hamad Khalifa Al-Thani.

They will be joined by United Nations secretary-general Kofi Annan and Arab League chairman Amr Moussa.

Notably absent are Libyan leader Col Muammar Gaddafi, Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat now trapped in his Ramalah headquarters and Prime Minister Ahmed Qureia. Palestine will be represented by its Foreign Minister.

There are also uncertainties over Iraq's representatives at the summit as the leadership of the country's ruling council, set up by the occupation forces after the ouster of Saddam Hussein, is rotated on a monthly-basis.

On Palestine, the stand of Malaysia and many other OIC members is of the need to address the double standard practiced especially by the United States in finding a permanent solution to peace in the Middle East.

"The bottom line for us when it comes to the Palestinian issue is that the US, as patron, and other members of the diplomatic quartet (UN, the European Union and Russia) must do something and be balanced in handling the problem," said Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar.

Recent developments in Iraq, which have forced the US to turn to the UN for assistance but at the same time being adamant of not wanting to relinquish control over the country, is another major cause of concern to be raised during discussions.