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Malaysia steers OIC towards tackling key issues facing ummah

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MALAYSIA steered the 10th Organisation of the Islamic Conference Summit away from rhetoric and towards tackling key issues facing the 1.3 billion-strong ummah, but the two-day event was overshadowed by allegations of anti-Semitism against OIC chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

The vilification served only to expose a widespread Western bias against Islam, with the 33 heads of state and government who gathered since Thursday at the Putrajaya Convention Centre choosing instead to focus on the real issues at hand.

They included two key Malaysian initiatives - the push to revitalise the OIC to make it more action-based and a proposal to develop a Gold-based Trade Payment Arrangement (GTPA) as an alternative of trade settlement - successfully taken up by OIC members.

The summit, which ended on Friday, also made progress on the issue of Palestine.

Previous meetings resulted in declarations of condemnation, which carried little impact, but the final communique this time around called for the revitalisation of an economic boycott of Israel, long dormant among member states.

Member states also agreed to consider moving towards the GTPA, along with practical steps to promote trade and investment.

The agreement provides a realistic framework for OIC countries to increase trade and development conducted on their own terms, free of Western dictates.

Other Malaysian initiatives - a first-of-its-kind OIC business forum and expo - were held as side events to the summit to tap the huge potential for intra-OIC trade, which stands at 11 per cent.

The summit and expo underscored the importance of increasing trade and product accessibility among member countries, whose combined gross domestic product is one-fourth of Japan's.

A senior officials' meeting and a ministerial preparatory meeting preceded the summit. Both managed to iron out major differences among members on a number of contentious issues.

The hosting of the summit at the PCC, which is in the administrative capital of Putrajaya, served to highlight Malaysia as an example of a successful, modern and moderate Islamic country, but this was ignored by some.

Dr Mahathir came under fire from the Western media as soon as he ended his opening speech at the summit on Thursday.

He had called on members to stop the senseless violence committed against the enemies of Islam to re-consider their strategy. Several Western news agencies, chiefly the Associated Press and CNN, took certain phrases from Dr Mahathir's speech and placed them out of context to allege that he was an anti-Semite.

This drew condemnation from the European Union, the United States, Australia and several other countries.

By the next morning, all the hard work put in by the delegates and the heads of state and government was overtaken by the allegations.

The Western agencies went on to misrepresent a quote obtained from Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and turned it into an apology for Dr Mahathir's comments.

This brought many OIC leaders to Dr Mahathir's defence.

They included Iranian President Mohammad Khatami, Egyptian Prime Minister Ahmad Maher, and Palestinian Foreign Minister Farouk Kaddoumi.

Their unequivocal support for the OIC chairman underscored the progress made by an organisation whose 57 members often do not see eye to eye on many matters.

The ability to galvanise support and find a common stand on key issues among the kings, presidents and prime ministers at the summit affirmed Malaysia's hosting and chairmanship of the organisation.

It brings much needed hope for the ummah that the OIC is finally waking up to meet its original goal of maintaining the struggle to preserve the dignity, independence and natural rights of Muslims worldwide.