

14/10/2003

OIC must rise above the past

THE Organisation of the Islamic Conference was established 34 years ago in response to the arson attack on the Al-Aqsa Mosque in Jerusalem, and it was entrusted with the task of liberating Islam's third holiest city. The painful truth is that although many years have gone by, the liberation of Palestine remains a dream.

Although Jerusalem should no longer be the make-or-break issue, it continues to be a barometer of the OIC's failure to live up to its Charter to strengthen solidarity and co-operation among member states. Its support for the struggle of the Palestinian people has been reduced to ritual rhetorical condemnation of Israel. Its promised assistance to the Palestinian people has neither led to the recovery of their rights nor their occupied territories. Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat, threatened with expulsion and assassination by Israel and trapped in his Ramallah headquarters, cannot even attend the 10th OIC Summit in Kuala Lumpur.

Unable to strengthen the "struggle of all Muslim people to safeguard their dignity, independence and national rights", the OIC has become a helpless bystander as Muslims and Muslim countries become the target of the United States' global war on terror.

Although the members of OIC have come together under the collective identity that Islam provides, it is a complex unity which masks the great diversity of peoples, languages and cultures, and the many faces of Islam that they present and practise. Unity has been elusive and solidarity has been lacking. Muslim countries are divided on many issues ranging from Iraq to women's rights. Moreover, many OIC members are confronted with deep flaws within their societies and grapple with the problems of providing education, jobs and clean water to their peoples as well as combating the threats of famine and disease.

It is no surprise then that there have been mounting calls for a restructuring of the OIC in order to revitalise it and make it more relevant in the face of the daunting challenges confronting the Muslim world. While a comprehensive overhaul of the OIC might be wishful thinking, some practical reforms could be instituted. The Secretariat needs to be strengthened and has to go beyond its co-ordinating role to include policy formulation, strategic planning and the monitoring of implementation plans.

One area where the level of co-operation could be raised is in the economic field. There should be serious efforts to increase intra-OIC trade and to strengthen investment flows. Specific proposals such as the implementation of the Gold Dinar should be considered. Another area is the pooling of resources in developing scientific and techno-logical capabilities.

The OIC Summit should indeed be a time of critical re-examination and substantive action. The need for change is great. However, as with all inter-governmental organisations, the OIC is the sum of its member states. It can only work if its constituent members have the will to make it work. In the absence of such strong resolve in the past, expectations have been raised for the Kuala Lumpur Summit and Malaysia's helmsmanship of the organisation.

It is not impossible for the OIC Summit in Putrajaya to usher in badly needed reforms and set realistic goals. As Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said, although it would be difficult to get 1.3 billion

Muslims and all the Muslim countries to unite, the OIC could act effectively to unify some of them. "We are not too ambitious. We think we should have a different strategy which can give us better results."

The OIC must move on, if not by great leaps, then by incremental steps in a purposeful direction. We hope the heads of state and government who will arrive in Kuala Lumpur this week will rise above the past, attend to the urgencies of the present and give hope for the future. Let's have deeds, not words, words, words,