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Qatar strongly positioned to help Muslims band together

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DOHA, the capital of oil-rich Qatar, is probably not a preferred place for a holiday in the Middle East. The city is clean, with wide roads filled with Toyota four-wheel drive vehicles and various models of Fords and Chevrolets. The people like to drive fast but without the non-stop honking to be heard in Middle Eastern cities like Cairo and Mecca.

I was in Doha a few days ago, covering the emergency meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Conference. Qatar is chairman of the OIC and is handing over the chairmanship to Malaysia in October.

With oil and gas its biggest sources of income, making it Earth's richest country, Qatar must have felt no real need to go big in tourism. Qatar is said to have enough gas reserves to fuel all American homes for the next 100 years, National Geographic said in its latest issue.

Qatar, to citizens and foreign workers there, is like heaven on earth.

I got this impression after talking to several foreigners working there. This was how I got to meet Ahmad, a 21-year-old student of Pakistani parentage but born in Qatar. Ahmad's real name is Amir but he prefers to be called Ahmad.

Slim and actor-looking, Ahmad was one of several drivers dedicated to the Malaysian entourage. Engaged part-time, he ferried me and several colleagues from the Marriott where we were staying to the Ritz Carlton, the summit venue.

The Emir of Qatar, Shaikh Hamad Khalifa Al-Thani, is a generous man who believes in sharing his wealth, which explained why our food and accommodation were on the house.

Ahmad is studying the arts and hopes to find gainful employment in Qatar. Even though born in Qatar, Ahmad has not been offered citizenship, but he finds Qatar offers more opportunities for a better and more productive life.

There are many others like Ahmad in Qatar, either studying or exchanging their labour for good money and other benefits.

In fact, there are between 300,000 and 400,000 migrant workers in Qatar - published reports gave the number as high as that. Qatar has a population of about 600,000 and two-thirds are foreigners doing all sorts of work, from driving taxis to being hotel bellboys, cooks and shop workers.

An Englishman I chatted with in the Marriott's fitness centre (read steam room) said he came to Doha to teach. John, from Southampton, was in his fourth year.

"I teach English. The money is good and life is rather easy and quiet. What is even better is I can save the money and hope to put aside a sum for later use. There aren't many things I can spend it on, except food and taxis."

Doha boasts a big shopping mall, selling some of the big and well-known brands of consumer goods. There are also many souqs (bazaars) around the city, quite like what we see along Chow Kit Road and Petaling Street.

My colleagues and I paid a visit to both places but we found them to be rather quiet and almost empty. Most of the sales persons were either Filipinos or from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Long stayers like Ahmad and Samon, a driver from Kerala, could speak Arabic and made themselves useful.

As I said, Doha is a rather quiet city, unlike Dubai where there are all

sorts of activities at various locations. This may not necessarily be a very accurate picture I'm painting but with such a small population, I doubt if things could be more busy than they already are.

Qatar is served by foreigners - in hotels, shopping malls, bazaars and the transport sector.

The Qataris, it appears to me, are far too dependent on their migrant workforce. I wonder what would happen if these expatriates decide to pack their bags and go home. The possibility of that is quite remote, simply due to hard economics.

Samon, the driver from Kerala, said he could afford to go back to see his family every year and be with them for up to three months at a time, that is, if he wants to. The money he saves each month can sustain his stay in Kerala without great difficulty, he said, adding that he will not jeopardise his stay in Doha under any circumstances.

To the migrant workers, every Qatari is an emir, and there's simply no reason to cause trouble, or walk away from a job that offers wealth beyond the dreams of most of them.

At the biggest shopping mall, we saw another aspect of Qatari life that now, in Malaysia, seems strange to most of us. In the not too distant past, Malaysians would rush and elbow each other to get into a taxi. Not anymore.

Now, the elbowing is in places like Doha. It doesn't matter if you had been waiting much earlier, someone may just appear out of the mall and jump into the taxi without batting an eyelid.

For all their modern trappings, the residents of Doha have not learned to queue. A guard who doubled as a taxi lookout man at the biggest mall tried to get customers leaving the mall to queue, but he was ignored.

Qatar offers an interesting perspective to me and my colleagues.

Here is a country so prosperous and wealthy, and which is now chairman of the OIC.

The Emir has a reputation for being a reformist, having ousted his father a few years ago in a bloodless coup.

Qatar is known to be friendly to the United States, having helped American forces launch attacks against Iraq in 1991.

The Qatari Government also provides millions of dollars to fund the operations of the Al-Jazeera television network, which boasts of 50 million viewers during prime time.

Qatar is not alone among Arab countries "friendly" to the US. It has joined the anti-war lobby, and has agreed with fellow Arab leaders not to allow American forces the use of their facilities when attacking Iraq in the war that many believe is sure to come.

Qatar's wealth, and that of other well-endowed Muslim countries, should devise strategies to improve the lot of Muslims all over the world. The Emir has started the reforms in his country. Perhaps he can join leaders like Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to work out an effective blueprint to get Muslims together against their common enemies.