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Strategic plan needed to address woes of Muslim world

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THESE are challenging times for the Muslims and the Islamic world. Not only are they labelled as "terrorists" and their religion blamed for teachings that allegedly encourage violence and terrorism, but they are also economically weak and increasingly falling behind despite their oil wealth.

The Arab World Competitiveness Report 2002-2003 notes that the standard of living for many in the oil-rich Arab world has declined with real incomes per capita falling in most of the Arab states over the past two decades. In fact the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita in the region as a whole was lower in 2000 than in 1980. This is despite the fact that no other region has so much access to homegrown financial capital as the Arab world.

It falls on the followers of the religion to right the wrong perceptions and labels attached to their faith. Despite their numbers and wealth they appear powerless and helpless to defend themselves and this is in part due to the divisions. It thus falls on the Muslims themselves to ensure that they are untied and move forward economically, not be exploited and not be left behind.

Thus the meeting of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) in Putrajaya this week had its task cut out for it. These are challenging times for the Muslims as their faith is under the microscope but all for the wrong reasons - terrorism and violence.

Meeting for the first time since the Sept 11 attacks and the invasion of an Islamic country, Iraq, and another under threat, it offers the OIC an opportunity to wake up, make a united stand and defend their faith.

With 1.3 billion Muslims accounting for about one-fifth of the world population and with about 70 per cent of the world's energy resources, the Islamic world has the strength of numbers as well as the wealth.

But unfortunately, as Prime Minister and chairman of the OIC, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, said, the ummah is divided and "we have become dependent on others, many of whom are not well disposed towards us". On the economic front too despite the fact that much of the oil comes from Muslim countries, "We are seemingly incapable of exploring, producing, processing and retailing our own oil".

Others exploit the divisions among the Muslims for their own benefit just as they reap the profits from exploring, processing, retailing and marketing the wealth and resources of the Muslim world.

It falls on the Muslims themselves to plug the holes, rectify the weaknesses and work together for their collective good. While admittedly not all 57 will be of the same mind but, as Dr Mahathir and his deputy Datuk Seri Abdullah Badawi pointed out, a start for co-operation can be made by even two or three like-minded Islamic states.

The success of the Islamic world and its achievements are not acknowledged and promoted as much as those of the developed world.

Even the Islamic world embraces developments and looks to the West for ideas and guidance. It continues to "Look West" to the developed world.

Islamic Banking and Islamic financial instruments in Malaysia are successful and have been accepted by even established banking institutions but its acceptance among the Muslim world is limited in that there is little participation from other OIC members.

Malaysia's development proves that Islam does not hamper progress. But it falls on the Muslims themselves to educate other Muslims and the non-Muslim world, especially in the current highly charged and suspicious environment.

Muslims are under greater scrutiny, blamed and held responsible for increased violence and terrorism around the world. They are angered by being put in the centre of most conflicts and being blamed for much of the violence and terrorism.

There is, as Pakistan's President Pervez Musharraf points out, a sense of "frustration, hopelessness, deprivation and powerlessness" which fuels "hatred, extremism and militancy".

Thus, the Muslims and the OIC have a massive task to correct the perception, misunderstanding and misconceptions of Islam. No one else will do it for them.

Singapore's Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew told participants of the World Economic Forum in Singapore that extremist Muslims bent on unleashing terror will pose a long-term problem and one that can be solved only by the Muslims themselves.

"You can kill the suicide bombers. There are hundreds of them but they are worker bees. The queen bees are the preachers in the madrasah ...so it is a problem which can finally only be solved only by the Muslims themselves."

It would be no use for non-Muslims to try to stop potential terrorists from being groomed in the Islamic schools, he said adding that "non-Muslims cannot go into these mosques and madrasahs and say your interpretation of the Quran is wrong".

The Muslims have a duty to themselves and to their faith to ensure that the mis-interpretations and misunderstandings are dealt with as soon as possible, convincingly and effectively. It means changing the mindset of the mighty and powerful, many of them in the developed world.

Dr Mahathir urged his fellow Muslims to "create a peaceful and prosperous environment where everyone can gain something for himself". This can be achieved through co-operation and collective effort by OIC. But despite its inherent strength the Muslim world is paralysed by its internal divisions, different views and perspectives.

As the Muslims continue to quarrel and remain divided, others exploit the "weakness and fissures among Islamic nations".

Globalisation throws up new challenges. These must be addressed, just as terrorism must be dealt with. But there must be a "strategic plan" to address the problems facing the Muslim world as well as for them to recover their past glory. In the new world order, the Muslims, and certainly the OIC, cannot sit back and allow misguided terrorists to ruin their future and hijack and tarnish their religion.

They have the numbers and they have the means but they must muster sufficient political will to do so. Dr Mahathir had advised that "we should not vent our anger and frustration by mounting futile isolated violence. Instead we should plan and execute the development of our ummah so as to be empowered by information technology and be capable of handling the challenges..." - and indeed the misconceptions and correct the misinformation.