

25/02/2003

The futility of violence

IN his 1827 work, *On War*, the Prussian military philosopher Karl von Clausewitz ventured his famous suggestion that "war is only a continuation of state policy by other means". Some 127 years later, in 1954, there was considerable historical irony in China's Premier Zhou Enlai wryly turning Clausewitz's contention on its head by asserting that "diplomacy is a continuation of war by other means".

Other than proving the entertainment value of semantics, however, such bromides on what war is or means have done little or nothing to prevent it. On the contrary, the world's educated minds seem to find fascinating ambiguities in the concept - there are "just wars", apparently; wars have spoils as well as spills; there is something called the "war dividend" - the benefits to the industrial economies of war-mongers, etc.

This is the grotesque Gordian Knot of bloody-mindedness through which Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad scythed his words at the opening of the Non-Aligned Movement Summit proper yesterday.

In a terse, succinct speech, Malaysia's Prime Minister thrice called for the outlawing of war. It was classic Mahathir Mohamad. No vacillation, hesitation or ambiguity; no half-measures; no beating about the bush: Ban War. Declare it illegal. Outlaw it, and empower the United Nations to enforce world peace rather than merely resolve to call for it.

Dr Mahathir has issued a sharp and strident challenge to the world. Can it be done? Is the outlawing of war a genuine option for the world? If not, why not? It is in answer to that final, implicit, loaded question that the world's nations - and not just the 116 represented by the NAM - will measure themselves.

The scope for theorising and philosophising has narrowed beyond any usefulness; not while millions of innocent lives are in the balance all over the world, as their national economies tumble and fall into the abyssal uncertainties opened in the United States-led "crusade" against "evil".

The world has irrevocably changed as a result, and untold distances now have to be traversed to whatever "new world order" may lie ahead. NAM, with Malaysia in the chair, must make the first leap.

Whatever the shape or form of that new order - and whatever new problems emerge with it - the Malaysian initiative now is to eliminate the option of war in conflict-resolution. If that seems unworkably radical, then the world has gone to hell.