

16/03/2003

United they stand

Seelen Sakran

THE consensus reached at the Organisation of Islamic Conference's (OIC) informal meeting of its heads at the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur was simple: to unite and renounce war against Iraq.

This message was made quite clear at the press conference given by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad (who hosted the meeting) on Feb 26. Altogether, 49 heads of states and representatives attended the meeting. Five could not attend while another three were awaiting their governments' approval.

Two other emergency summits followed suit in Doha, Qatar this month. A similar message resonated. 'Close ranks and speak with one voice' was the clear message. Interestingly, a lesser number of heads of state (including Dr Mahathir) attended this meeting. The rest of the countries were represented by their senior officials.

Can the outcomes in KL and Doha be considered a success? Some who attended the KL meeting say yes. Take the delegates from Lebanon who stated that 'agreeing on the consensus to consider making oil as a deterring factor was rather innovative'. Some questioned whether a loose organisation like the OIC could be a force to be reckoned with. Are they speaking with one voice?

Abdul Razak Baginda, executive director at the Malaysian Strategic Research Centre, says, 'There are two points to make. While there is a general consensus war should be avoided, there is a difference in opinion between the frontline OIC members and the other member states.'

To understand Abdul Razak's reasoning, one needs to look at who these countries are. Frontline member countries are Kuwait, Qatar and Saudi Arabia. These countries are Iraq's immediate neighbours, so the threat is real.

Unfortunately, 'OIC member states' voices are marginal,' explains Abdul Razak. Tan Sri Ramon Navaratnam, economic advisor of the Sunway Group, notes, 'OIC countries have in the past only displayed discord and minor squabbling.'

The most recent example of this was the heated exchange between Libyan leader Col. Muammar Gaddafi and US supporter Crown Prince Abdullah of Saudi Arabia during the Doha summit. In fact, the situation was so tense that Saudi Arabia threatened its non-attendance at the OIC's meeting on March 6. That meeting too was also a raucous affair with a war of words erupting between the representatives of Iraq and Kuwait.

Another reason why the OIC may not be considered by some to be influential, at least economically, is its lack of clout in trade. Statistics are hard to come by, but in 1998 OIC member states' total world exports hovered around 6.31 per cent of total world exports. Is that big enough for developed countries like the Group of Seven (G7) to consider the OIC's views seriously?

'That is why I feel the United Nation's Security Council is the only way to avoid war,' says Abdul Razak.

Given the circumstances, Saudi Arabia, just like Qatar and Kuwait, has reason to back a US presence on its soil. As Abdul Razak pertinently asks, 'Will Libya protect Saudi Arabia (in the event of an attack)?'

In a side development, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) has called for Iraqi president Saddam Hussein to step down from office. The UAE's call is now being supported by Bahrain and Kuwait.

Of course, a change in government could be the answer, all things considered. The question is, will he?

(END)