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Words, not bullets; freedom, not oppression - NAM's way forward

Ahmad A. Talib

IT'S just the beginning - Malaysia's chairmanship of the Non-Aligned Movement, that is. But that's enough to inspire a friendly wordsmith to e-mail me the above lines just after Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad took to the rostrum.

The opening ceremony was shown live on television, but one just has to be inside Dewan Merdeka to soak in the atmosphere of yet another milestone in the country's history. Some guests and other special pass holders were seated two hours inside the hall, well before the Prime Minister spoke at 10.15am.

But it was worth the wait. A group of Malay, Chinese and Indian traditional musicians were seated at one corner of the first floor gallery playing a medley of songs. Together with Khatijah Ibrahim, elegant in her light green one-piece dress, backed by boys and girls from the national choir, they lent an air of gaiety to the proceedings.

Some foreign guests and officials were in their national costumes which lent colour to a sober and serious event. A few foreign correspondents trying to beat their deadlines were typing furiously on their laptops in the gallery seats reserved for the media.

The issues and task before NAM, and its new chairman, are immediate and challenging. Not that they weren't before. As chairman, Malaysia will now have to provide the leadership expected of a country that is known to mean what it says and says what it means.

There was silence when Dr Mahathir delivered his speech from the same rostrum which he used when addressing the annual Umno general assembly. Unlike his Umno speeches, when he was often interrupted with applause, yesterday's delivery was met with serious attention.

The previous chairman, South Africa's Thabo Mbeki, eloquent and precise, described Kuala Lumpur as the city of hope, suggesting that the deliberations at the 13th Summit offer fresh expectations and fulfilment. Of course, it remains to be seen whether NAM's vision of a new world order can be achieved or not.

NAM's most immediate task is to do everything within its power to, save for military action, stop the war that seems sure to come to Iraq. In fact, NAM must use whatever leverage is within its means to stop all wars. Period. Once this is done, the rest can fall into place - the full self-determination of Palestine being next.