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PM: S&T important to ummah

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THE writer was privileged to listen to the speech of the Prime Minister at the opening of the 10th Session of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference Summit in Putrajaya.

On that day, the place, the event and the man seemed to converge on one vital element: the importance of science and technology (S&T), with specific reference to Muslims.

Putrajaya is a made-in-Malaysia example of how S&T can be put to good use as epitomised by the architecture and wetland and garden-like environment.

The summit, on the other hand, is about what happens if S&T is not given its meaningful place in development.

The man, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohammad, is an ardent advocate of S&T.

Since two decades ago, barely a year after he assumed office, Dr Mahathir has been championing S&T. In June 1983, he spoke about Islam and technology at an international conference with the same name.

At that time, he was calling on Muslims to instil in themselves the right spirit and attitude so that they can catch up with others in technology.

Again in 1987, at the opening of the 8th Meeting of The Islamic Foundation for Science, Technology and Development Scientific Council (IFSTDSC), he spoke of the need for Muslim nations to enhance co-operation in S&T.

There were many other occasions, the recent being the summit, where he was more forceful in delivering the same message to almost the same group of nations.

This is historic as it was the first and largest gathering of Muslim heads of state and government, post Sept 11, 2001.

In fact, in his latest address, he paraphrased what he highlighted in 1987: "In the case of science and technology, we know that our failure to follow the injunctions of our religion has resulted in our present weakness and being at the mercy of our enemies and those who do not wish us well."

He concluded the speech with a hope "to find ways and means of implementing successfully the resolutions adopted by the 5th Islamic Summit Conference in Kuwait, especially on scientific and technological co-operation".

However, the hope remains a dream, since summit after summit, the co-operation among Muslim community on S&T is still wanting.

Effectively, nothing has changed, despite more than 15 years having passed by.

Dr Mahathir, basing it largely on this, said: "Today we, the whole Muslim ummah are treated with contempt and dishonour. Our religion is denigrated.

"Our holy places are desecrated. Our countries are occupied. Our people starved and killed."

No one would have dared to be more candid about the Muslim state of affairs.

So what hope is there this time around? Not much, if not for a four-day meeting of experts on "Science and Technology for Industrial Development in Islamic Countries" was held in Kuala Lumpur, ahead of the summit.

Following this, in the Putrajaya

Declaration, the summit agreed to undertake the development of S&T among members through regular conferences.

They also agreed to set up a research and development fund to help in the much-needed capacity-building, especially human resources development in S&T.

However, the one that is particularly instructive is the setting up of a S&T think tank.

This is in sync with the Prime Minister's opening speech when he referred, on at least three occasions, to the need to think.

Imploring that it is necessary to act urgently, he said: "This is entirely possible if we stop to think, to plan, to strategise and to take the first few critical steps."

At another point, he said: "It is surely time that we pause and think. If we had paused to think, then we could have devised a plan, a strategy that can win us final victory."

Again, emphatically, he insisted that we cannot fight through brawn alone. "We must use our brains also."

It is also in tandem with not only science, but Islam itself, which encourages thinking and using our brains.

Moreover, we are in an era of brainpower where numbers alone, even as many as 1.3 billion Muslims, are inconsequential if most of them only think that they are thinking.

These are the harsh realities of today, a stern reminder for Muslims to adopt new mindsets and change the situation they have dug themselves into.

In fact, on two occasions in his speech the Prime Minister quoted a verse of the Quran stating that God will not change the fate of a community until the community has tried to change its fate itself.

And for this, thinking things anew is almost a prerequisite. As Einstein observed, a problem created at one level of thinking cannot be solved at the same level of thinking. We need not only to think, but think out of the box as well.

At this juncture, it is pertinent to point out what is amiss in the recommendations put forward by S&T experts.

Sorely missed was the over-arching C, for 'creativity'.

For without creative and innovative thinking, the mind (Muslims and non-Muslims alike) tends to gravitate to the same old way, changing only incrementally, if at all.

Unlike the Muslim of before, Muslims today seem to be bogged down with form rather than substance.

As long as the form is preserved, many, especially among the elite, are comfortable, reducing to naught much of the God-endowed talent to invent and innovate.

Taking a hint from the first Muslim Nobel Laureate in Physics, Abdus Salam, when asked what has happened to science in the Islamic community, he replied:

"Nothing. Instead what we cultivated in Isafahan and Cordova is now being cultivated in MIT, Caltech and at Imperial College, London."

It is not surprising therefore that the next Muslim Nobel Laureate in Chemistry, Ahmed Zewail, comes from Caltech, United States.

It is not as though there are no Muslims with enough creativity to make a difference.

It is because in many Muslim countries, the environment is shaped by some archaic thinking that is repugnant to Islam and S&T. This forces more brain drain from these countries, depriving the nation even further.

Putting it differently, Zewail said: "We need, in effect, an 'education jihad' - a campaign among all the Muslim countries to strive for excellence in literacy and modern science."

In relation to this, he also made mention of his consultation with Dr Mahathir, whom he described as "truly a visionary leader".

Indeed, Dr Mahathir has been leading an "education jihad" ever since, insisting that S&T be given its rightful role.

His vision of this "jihad" is so compelling that it will continue to lead and motivate many, Muslims and non-Muslims.

For such reasons and more, this column would like to pay its highest tribute to his leadership.

Honorable Prime Minister, sir, Malaysia is thankful to have someone of your calibre from among us, and you will be dearly missed.

However, your passion for S&T will continue to inspire us to achieve Vision 2020 and 1441, God willing.