

MALAYSIA has urged US President George W. Bush to have a better understanding of Muslims.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi held a 55-minute meeting with Bush on Monday and said they discussed the importance of cultivating respect among people of different religions.

Bush "admitted that we (Muslims) wanted peace, and he, too, wanted peace, but our approaches were different", Abdullah said.

The PM, who is in New York to attend the United Nations General Assembly, expressed hope that Bush would acknowledge efforts by those involved in conflicts in the Middle East to find their own way to resolve the problems.

Abdullah, who is also chairman of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) nations, told Bush that America's support for the proposed unity government in Palestine was urgently needed as the efforts by the Fatah and Hamas factions should be accepted as a legitimate Palestinian government.

Washington's refusal to acknowledge Hamas as the ruling government in Palestine has stopped other nations from providing financial assistance to the ailing state. Palestine is facing a major shortage of funds to support the daily operations of various public services.

"The government must be one that represents Palestine in whatever negotiations that may take place later on," Abdullah said, adding that he plans to meet with Mahmoud Abbas to discuss the efforts.

Both leaders also talked about the UN-brokered ceasefire that

ended the recent fighting between Hizbollah guerillas and Israeli forces in Lebanon.

Bush welcomed Malaysia's plan to contribute to a UN peacekeeping force, Abdullah said, noting that Malaysia was still waiting for official approval from the world body to send troops.

Both leaders also spoke about Iran, another potential flashpoint between the West and the Muslim world.

The US has been alleging that Iran's nuclear programme was aimed at developing nuclear weapons although Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said they were for peaceful purposes. Bush had pledged to use his speech at the UN General Assem-

bly to send Iran a clear warning that Teheran must heed a UN Security Council resolution calling it to suspend its uranium enrichment programme.

Ahmadinejad was scheduled to speak just hours after Bush's address at the General Assembly and UN diplomats expect him to defend Iran's right to develop its own peaceful nuclear programme.

In his meeting with Bush, Abdullah said he told the US President that any negotiations with Iran to halt its nuclear programme must be done without conditions.

Abdullah said Bush agreed that the best way to cool down the potential explosive situation with Iran was through diplomacy.

Abdullah said he also voiced hope for a stronger focus to bring stability to violence-wracked Iraq.

AP reports that US National security council East Asian affairs director Dennis Wilder said much of Bush and Abdullah's conversation had focused on the relationship and "common roots" of Islam, Christianity and Judaism and "their belief that there is much that these religions can learn from each other".

Abdullah "is an excellent friend of the president, and as a democracy with a Muslim majority in its population, Malaysia has a great deal to offer as a sounding board for the president of the United States in his outreach to the Muslim world", added Wilder.

Understand Muslims better, Bush urged

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