

Annan gives Malaysia top marks for harmony

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KUALA LUMPUR: Malaysia has been given top ratings for setting an example of peaceful co-existence in its diverse society.

Former United Nations secretary-general and Nobel laureate Kofi Annan praised Malaysia for being a relatively peaceful country despite its cultural differences and different faiths.

"It has managed the ethnic mix better than any other society that I can think of. The Malaysian society, which celebrates both unity and diversity, is a message that should be shared with the rest of the world.

"I have no doubt that there are difficulties in any nation attempting to improve conditions and their way of life. There may be problems in Malaysia but it's all relative. Look around you, and compare it with other situations. You will find that your country has the best perspective."

Speaking to foreign and local journalists here yesterday, Annan praised the Malaysian leadership, which he described as ever-ready to provide aid to other countries in need.

"Over the past 10 years as the UN secretary-general, I was often on the phone with former prime minister Tun

Dr Mahathir Mohamad and Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi on issues where we needed support and leadership from certain Islamic countries.

"The prime ministers have always responded, whether it was a question of assistance in Timor Leste or in other parts of the world. In fact, after the war between Lebanon and Israel, Malaysia was one of the countries to offer its troops so that we could put an international stabilisation force in the south of Lebanon to separate the forces."

Annan also called for a clearer voice of the moderate majority. "Where religion is exploited, it is often by an extremist minority to support their cause, however brutal. What is sad is that the majority don't speak out. They keep quiet and the impression is that the extremists speak for the religion and make others resent the religion."

He said the current debate was usually between those who saw the West as threatening their beliefs, their future and their political aspirations, and those in the West who saw Islam as an extremist religion and who took the activities and statements by extremists as representing Islam.

"I wish that the majority would speak up. I think Malaysia has a voice and should use it more often."