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'Collective Asean stand warranted'

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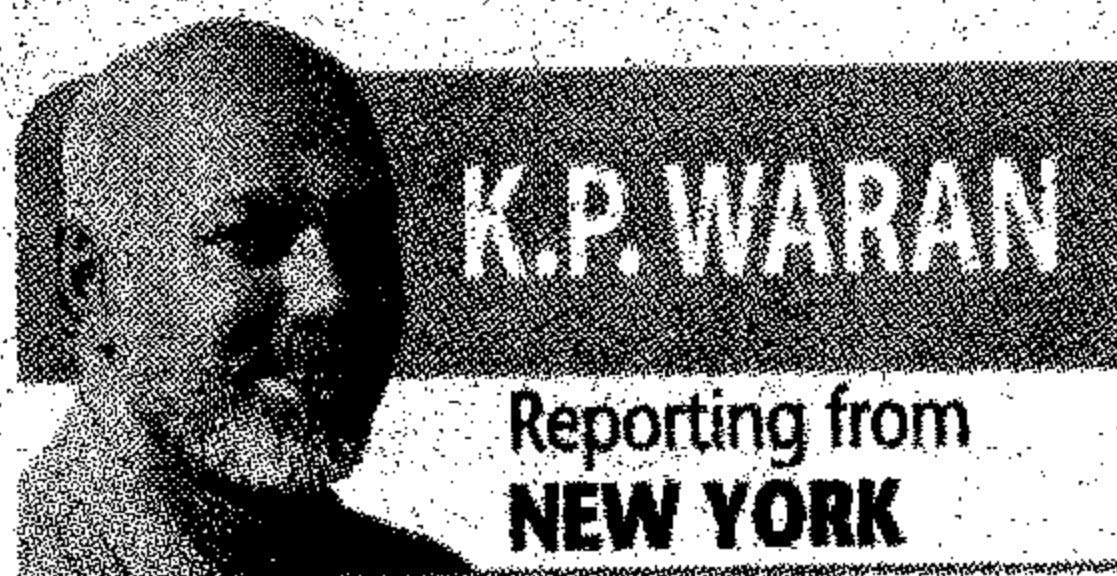
MALAYSIA'S firm stand against the excessive use of force by the Myanmar government against protesters and the need to institute quick reforms is shared by other members of Asean.

Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the deteriorating situation in Myanmar warranted a strong collective statement from Asean, which was issued by the grouping's foreign ministers after a meeting here, and a common stand by individual governments to reflect their concern over the political turmoil there.

The prime minister said this when explaining his decision to include remarks on Myanmar during his address at the United Nations General Assembly on Friday. The remarks were originally not in his prepared speech.

He said in view of the latest developments in Yangon, where lives were lost when soldiers opened fire on demonstrators, it was necessary for the Malaysian government to make known its displeasure.

Abdullah told the assembly that Myanmar must release political



prisoners, including National League of Democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi, whose party won the general election in 1990 but was denied the right to form a government by the military junta. She has since been under house arrest.

He said it would be remiss for Malaysia, as a member of Asean, to ignore the situation in Myanmar, especially since the regional grouping had done everything possible to encourage the country towards reconciliation and democracy.

He blamed Myanmar's failure to institute reforms that had brought the current situation upon itself and added that Malaysia, along with other Asean countries, disapproved of the excessive use of force by the Myanmar government to

quell a civilian protest.

At his press conference, Abdullah said he also met with Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas. They discussed the forthcoming peace forum in November, to which Malaysia has been invited to participate.

Abdullah also told Abbas the need for Hamas and Fatah to set aside their differences and be united when embarking on negotiations to bring peace to Palestine.

He said Israel and other parties would benefit if there was discord between the two factions.

Hamas controls Gaza, while the West Bank is under the control of Fatah.

"Abbas agreed there is a need to have a united front and said he would strive to resolve the issue.

"I am confident that Abbas can speak and represent all Palestinians at the peace forum."

Abdullah described his visit to New York as fruitful, having held discussions and exchanged views with several leaders.