

'Constructive' meeting

Abdullah, Bush discuss bridging gap between Western and Muslim worlds

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**RAJAN
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FROM
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DATUK Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi and US President George W. Bush, in a longer than scheduled meeting yesterday, had, in the words of Bush, "a constructive meeting" at which they discussed how the Western and Muslim worlds could bridge the gap caused by their differing views on terrorism and the Middle East conflict.

Abdullah, on his first official visit to the United States as Prime Minister, informed Bush that it was imperative that both the West and Muslim countries not be driven by extremist impulses but find a "moderate centre" in dealing with each other.

He said the United States had to convince those affected by its campaign against terror that it was not waging a war against Islam. It should also demonstrate good faith in addressing the root causes of terrorism and the grievances of the Muslim world, he said.

Abdullah, chairman of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and head of the Non-Aligned Movement, which together represent more than two-thirds of the countries in the world, met Bush at the Oval Office in the White House for nearly an hour, indicating the meeting was positive. Their meeting was originally scheduled for only 25 minutes.

In comments to the Press immediately after the meeting, Bush said, "it's been a very constructive meeting".

"We talked about how we can work together to improve the economic condition of both our countries, as well as the Middle East. The Prime Minister had some very interesting suggestions about the Middle East," Bush said, adding that he had assured Abdullah that he was "fully committed" to the development of a Palestinian state that can live alongside Israel in peace.

Malaysia has always maintained that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict needed to be resolved in order to find a solution to the terrorism threat.

Abdullah said he discussed with Bush the need for developed nations to assist Muslim countries, especially the poor ones, which





WARM WELCOME: Abdullah greeting Powell before the start of a meeting on Monday in Washington. — AP picture

Abdullah: We want more US firms to set up regional centres in Malaysia

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needed to gain a better future and thereby be able to stanch radicalism and extremism.

The two leaders also discussed Iraq's reconstruction, ways to stem a growing divide between Muslim nations and the West, concerns over the war on terrorism, and the Palestine issue.

After the talks, described by officials as "relaxed", the two leaders met newsmen briefly.

The meeting was attended by several top US officials, including Secretary of State Colin Powell and National Security Adviser Condoleezza Rice.

Abdullah was accompanied by Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and Malaysian Ambassador to the US, Datuk Ghazzali Sheikh Khalid.

Abdullah later said it was good for him to hear from Bush the many aspects of the issues pertaining to Palestine and Israel.

"There's nothing better than to get it from the President of the United States himself because he is very much involved in the management of all these problems and issues," he

said.

Abdullah also reaffirmed to Bush Malaysia's commitment to send a substantial medical team to Iraq and to help in the reconstruction of the country. He said the Defence and Foreign Ministries would determine the size and deployment of the team.

Abdullah noted that bilateral ties with the US had always been strong in counter-terrorism, defence, economic relations and other areas.

Later, Abdullah told Malaysian newsmen that Bush indicated during the discussions that he was keen to improve the image of the US in the eyes of the Muslim world.

Bush expressed willingness to find a resolution to the Palestinian issue, while noting that an Israeli court had made a similar judgment to that of the International Court of Justice on the Israeli construction of a wall along its border with Palestine.

Abdullah earlier met Powell and Trade Representative Robert Zoellick, the co-chairmen of the Malaysian Caucus, Congressmen Gregory Meeks and Pete Sessions, and met Malaysian students at the embassy in downtown Washington.

At night, he attended a dinner hosted by the US-Asean Business Coun-

cil, attended by some 400 top businessmen and senior officials where he said Malaysia was ready to rally support among Muslim nations for OIC participation in rebuilding Iraq.

Abdullah said while the West had to learn from past mistakes, the Muslim world, in which most nations were under-developed and lacked socio-economic maturity, had an obligation to practise good governance as a shield against radical Islam.

"Bad governance is the first vulnerability that radical groups exploit," he added.

Abdullah also impressed upon Business Council members that the Barisan Nasional's sweep of almost 95 per cent of the seats in the March general election showcased Malaysia as a tolerant, multi-racial and multi-religious nation.

The country now wanted more US companies to set up their regional distribution centres, operational headquarters and international procurement centres in Malaysia.

"Business process outsourcing is a burgeoning sector in Malaysia, where we offer the competitive advantages of a highly trained, English-speaking work force and world class ICT infrastructure," Abdullah said.