

PM charms Washington

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The Prime Minister's White House visit was short but significant. RAJAN MOSES reports on Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi's effort to bridge the growing divide between the Muslim world and the West.

IT was a short visit. More than half a dozen meetings, interviews and dinner packed into 15 hours. But it certainly was long on content. When Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi arrived in the United States at the invitation of President George W. Bush, it was against a backdrop of six years of barely cordial relations.

Since the then US Vice-President Al Gore stunned Malaysians with his undiplomatic and rude behaviour at the Apec Summit in Kuala Lumpur in 1998, relations between the two countries could certainly not be described as "friendly".

When Bush became president in 2000, there were hopes that things would warm up but Sept 11 happened and subsequently, the war against Iraq, which Malaysia opposed vehemently.

However, much water has passed under the bridge since then. In one day, Abdullah met Bush in the Oval Office, held talks with Secretary of State Colin Powell, and Trade Representative Robert Zoellick and met two Congressmen representing the Malaysian Caucus.

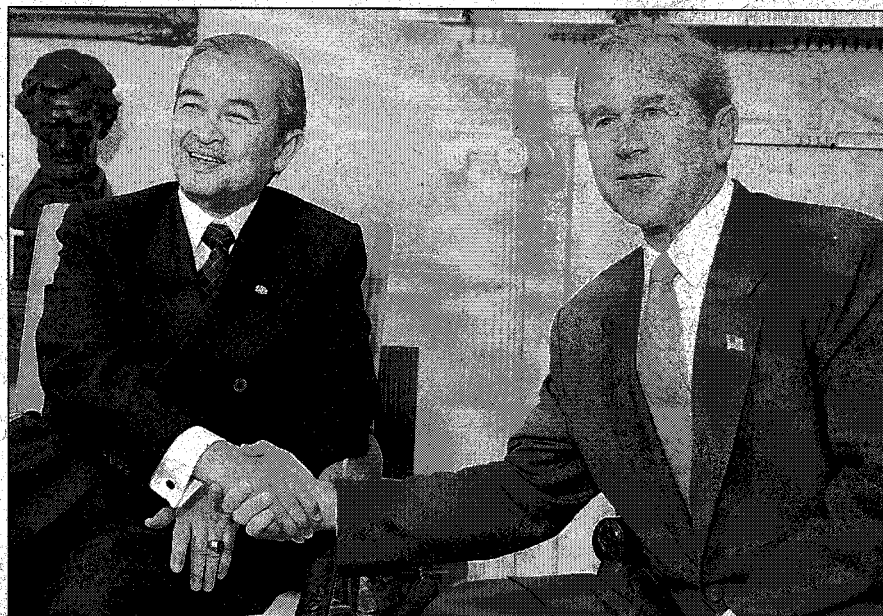
On the same day, he gave interviews to CNN and the *Washington Post*, had high tea with Malaysian students and attended a dinner with the US-Asean Business Council to stump for Malaysia.

Wearing the hats of the chairman of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference (OIC) and the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Abdullah conveyed to the US administration a host of messages and insights that have, in the views of diplomats here, "moved the debate forward".

The meeting with Bush, too, went well, lasting twice the time originally allocated, signalling a warming of relations between the two countries which have been allies since Malaysia's independence in 1957.

Abdullah spoke with Bush on the need to "rebuild confidence" between the Muslim world and the West after the Iraq war.

He also pushed the need for some demonstration of good faith from the US in addressing the root causes of global terrorism and, in particular, the unre-



CORDIAL MEETING: Abdullah (left) and Bush at the White House on Monday.

solved question of Palestine.

The PM also stressed the urgency of finding a "moderate centre" and the need for both sides of the spectrum not to be driven by extremist impulses or extremist elements, of finding ways to bridge the growing divide between the Muslim world and the West and the need to show that legitimate grievances of the Muslims were taken seriously.

He proposed to Bush that "capacity building" or the provision of constructive assistance to Iraq and other poorer Muslim nations in the sub-Saharan area would go a long way in helping the people there shun radicalism and extremism — the bane of peace in the world today.

Abdullah said Malaysia was prepared to participate in the reconstruction of Iraq, was ready to deal with the interim government and send a "sizable" medical team to the war-torn country in its hour of need and rally the support of OIC nations to do likewise.

US officials hailed the Abdullah visit. "Our Government was extremely pleased to hear him say that Malaysia was donating a medical team to go to Iraq," said a

senior State Department official.

"This is important as we had long hoped that Malaysia as a moderate Muslim-majority country would help out. This is particularly helpful because Malaysia is the chair of the OIC right now and of NAM.

"This sets a strong example for fellow Muslim countries to follow. We are just delighted."

Bush was quick to show his delight at a media appearance with the Prime Minister when he interjected and said "thank you, very much" to Abdullah just as he announced that Malaysia would be sending a medical team to Iraq.

Another US official said that relations between the US and Malaysia would surely warm following the visit of the PM.

"We see a marked change in the approach of Abdullah to relations between the two countries.

"Of course, the two countries have differences, but he is showing that he is prepared to engage the US and that has warmed a lot of people in the administration here," said the official.

The renewed interest in Malaysia in Washington was evident from the big and

enthusiastic turnout at the US-Asean Business Council dinner in honour of the PM on Monday night.

US officials said the Bush administration valued the insights provided by Abdullah on issues affecting Muslim nations as Malaysia was a moderate Muslim-majority country that had figured out how to live with religious diversity, be democratic and economically successful.

These lessons learnt by Malaysia were well worth sharing with non-Muslim countries to enlighten them on how the West could approach Muslims at a time when misunderstanding was rife, they added.

However, they conceded that there were still differences in views between the two nations on certain issues such as the US approach to Israel and the Palestine question.

Malaysian officials described Abdullah's US visit as positive because the Prime Minister managed to get across his viewpoints to Bush and other top officials in a cordial atmosphere.

"The PM is happy with the outcome of the visit because he felt a sense of responsibility to mention all this to Bush. We can't say if the US accepts all that we said, but we got ourselves heard," said a Malaysian official.

Abdullah told Bush that there was a perception in the world that the US favours Israel, although the President denied that was the case.

Malaysian officials said it was now up to the US, after the visit, to assess and address the various issues raised by Abdullah, not only as Malaysia's Prime Minister but also as chairman of OIC and NAM.

Malaysia's Ambassador to the US, Datuk Ghazzali Sheikh Khalid, summed it all up this way:

"The Prime Minister's visit has given a strong boost to bilateral relations and we now look forward to stronger relations between the two countries. Both sides have a better appreciation of each other's policies, although we have our differences."