

Malaysia's

ROLE

AFTER the success of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit earlier this year, Malaysia plays host to another important international event - the 10th Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC). This major event attracting the participation of various heads of state and government will be held in Putrajaya from Oct 11 to Oct 18, 2003.

The conference, also known as the Putrajaya Summit, is the first to be held in the Asia Pacific region. It is also the first event to be held at the new RM650 million Putrajaya Convention Centre.

The meeting is held every three years. The summit this year carries the theme 'Knowledge and Morality for Progress of Ummah'. The previous summit was held in oil-rich Qatar in 2000.

History

The OIC was formed in Rabat, Morocco, in September 1969 after Zionists militants set fire to the sacred Al-Aqsa mosque in Jerusalem in August the same year. Triggered by the tragedy, the organisation's initial targets are to defend the honour, dignity and faith of the Muslims, to safeguard Muslim Holy places, especially the Al-Aqsa mosque, and support the struggle of Palestinians.

Today, the organisation's role has widened and comprises 57 member nations. Discussions linger not only on the unre-

lenting Palestinian-Israeli conflict, but also other issues and challenges facing the global Muslim community, such as economic cooperation and education.

The organisation's role is more crucial after the terrorist's attacks on the world's only superpower on Sept 11, 2001. The attack destroyed Islam's image as a peaceful religion. It resulted in increasing discrimination against Muslims living in the United States and Europe. Certain Muslim-majority countries are now targets of retaliation by the US while others are under close scrutiny and suspicion for harbouring terrorist groups.

No doubt, the October gathering is a good platform for Muslim nations to close ranks, cooperate with one another and rebuild the

image of Islam worldwide. An awesome task, indeed, even for the OIC. On this score, some parties have their reservations. Since inception, they argue that the OIC failed to make any significant impact to improve the condition of the Muslims globally.

The OIC has been widely criticised for not achieving its goals and performing its role as anticipated. Still, the organisation remains an important political platform for Muslim nations to express their views as one group to the world.

This has led to a number of OIC member countries suggesting Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to be the next secretary general. They hope that his leadership and vision would transform the organisation into a more dynamic entity.

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By Ayu Aziz

But Dr Mahathir, who is retiring by end of this month after more than 20 years in office, has declined the offer. Nonetheless, he made it clear his willingness to contribute his views and ideas in future, as and when the need arises.

Had he accepted the offer, Dr Mahathir would have been the second Malaysian to hold the post. The late Tunku Abdul Rahman Putra, the country's first prime minister, was OIC's first secretary general, serving for three years from 1971.

Leadership

Now, with Malaysia at the helm of OIC's leadership, will it make any difference? Not so soon. 'We are not part of the main

stream of Arab politics, which dominates the Muslim world. Whatever we say or do has little bearing on this area,' says Abdul Razak Baginda, the director of Malaysian Strategic Research Centre.

He argues that proximity plays an important role in OIC when it comes to decision-making for these frontline states. Malaysia lacks any form of leverage on the Muslim world. 'What we have is moral persuasion and the fact that we are a shining example of a successful Muslim world, not wealth mind you, as there are other Arab states in the Gulf are far wealthier, though in politically precarious condition,' he adds.

'In a nutshell, one should not expect too much from Malaysia's leadership, as the outcome is the only the total input from its



ABDUL RAZAK: Proximity plays a role.

members. If states do not want to move on critical international issues, there is little that we can do.'

Regardless of its limited influence on the organisation, Malaysia must continue to play a role to concentrate on promoting a moderate face of Islam to the world. 'This is the best that we can do. However, we must also be able to talk to the Western countries and through this we must "punch" for the moderate view of Islam,' says Abdul Razak.

Hence, in a world of shattered peace post-9/11 - the tragic terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Center and the Pentagon - forward-looking Malaysia has taken upon itself a big task. Unsettling as the challenges may seem, Malaysia has a role to play. It may just surprise everyone. **mb**