

Malaysia mobilizes to save Bosnia

by Lydia Cherry

Why is it that the West has been so slow to act against Serbian violence in Bosnia-Herzegovina, but was—and is—so willing to go to war against Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, Dr. Mahathir Mohamed, prime minister of Malaysia, has publicly queried several times in recent weeks. As quoted by Radio Malaysia Aug. 9, “the prime minister lashed out at the attitude of the United States over the Bosnia issue . . . so many Bosnians have been killed and yet the U.S. is just going to think about it. He said that Washington was only willing to look at the plight of the Bosnians when detention camp reports were revealed, but they are ready to go to war against President Saddam Hussein. He said he did not know what are their priorities!”

Dr. Mahathir has also blasted the attitude of the U.N. Security Council. At an Aug. 17 press conference, he noted that by the time the Security Council acts, “many more Bosnians will have been killed. Maybe, in the end, there will be no more Muslims in Bosnia.”

Though a preoccupation with the crisis in former Yugoslavia has recently pervaded the country’s diplomacy, Dr. Mahathir has also tried to mobilize diplomatic support against a new attack on Iraq. The Malaysian daily *New Straits Times* on Aug. 8 published as a banner headline: “PM: We Oppose Iraq Attack.” Mahathir is quoted: “We will not support any action to invade Iraq just to unseat Saddam. Our stand is clear as we are against military aggression.”

An organizing drive

The president of the Bosnian Merhamat Muslim Charitable Society, Dr. Izet Aganovic, with his wife and children, were in the Malaysian capital of Kuala Lumpur the second week in August, with a videotape that showed the atrocities committed by Serbs against the Bosnians. Aganovic told a gathering that Malaysia was the first predominantly Muslim country to give its political support, and the only one to have severed diplomatic relations with Yugoslavia. High-level government officials were present at a fundraising event Aug. 14, including Malaysian Foreign Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi. A Malaysian task force was set up to coordinate collection of donations for the Bosnia-Herzegovina refugees fund. Dr. Aganovic explained that the Bosnian government has set up villages to relocate the war victims, and that the villages would be sponsored by donating countries and would be named after the respective countries.

Malaysia severed relations with Yugoslavia on Aug. 12, the only country thus far to have taken this action. A radio commentary the same day helped to clarify Malaysia’s historical connection to the eastern European country, particularly in light of the fact that Malaysia is now one of the leading countries of the Non-Aligned Movement. “It may be remembered that the former Yugoslavia was one of the founding members of the Non-Aligned Movement along with India and Indonesia. If Tito, Nehru, and Sukarno were alive today, they would no doubt be horrified by the situation that is now prevailing in Bosnia-Herzegovina. Immediate action should be taken to rid Sarajevo of its present image as a killing field.”

The campaign to save Bosnia is being mobilized by Malaysians across the political spectrum. Even the leader of the Chinese-dominated opposition Democratic Action Party, Lim Kit Siang, issued four statements condemning the atrocities in Bosnia-Herzegovina.

Dr. Chandra Muzaffar, the former head of the nongovernmental organization Aliran, in a strongly worded commentary in *New Straits Times* on Aug. 17, challenged Europe to act to save Muslim Bosnia on the basis of “those sublime values which western civilization claims to represent.”

Chandra writes that it is urgently needed “to demonstrate to the Muslims of Europe and the world, through Bosnia-Herzegovina, that Europe is capable of justice. . . . Sarajevo is the place where the sincerity—or the hypocrisy—of all those lofty ideals, of all those sublime values, which western civilization claims to represent, would be established once and for all. . . . What is taking place in Bosnia-Herzegovina is ‘ethnic cleansing,’ a euphemism, as it were, for an ethnic program of the vilest kind.” Reflecting on what Europe experienced in the Nazi era, he says, “What sort of civilization is it which can allow such a merciless massacre to happen again?” In terms of sheer magnitude—“20,000 killed in Croatia earlier, now 50,000 dead in Bosnia-Herzegovina—the Serbian slaughter is the worst human rights violation in Europe since World War II.” He hits the human rights lobby, noting that “human rights groups whose anger and indignation know no bounds when some dissident is executed in Rwanda or some critic is tortured in Lesotho, have not translated their moral outrage into concrete action. . . . What is at stake here is the most precious of all human rights—the *right to live*”—a refrain often emphasized by Dr. Mahathir.

Chandra charges that “for more than 1,200 years the most influential and authoritative sections of European society have displayed tremendous antagonism toward Islam and Muslims. . . . If, right from the outset, Europe and the West had adopted a principled approach to Bosnia-Herzegovina, they would have convinced a lot of people that they are beginning to overcome some of their hatred and bias towards a religious civilization to which they owe such an immense intellectual debt. . . . Europe has the means, but does it have the will?”