

Amicable solution to dispute

THE claims over Spratly islands should be resolved through negotiations and not confrontation, said Prime Minister **Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir** Mohamad yesterday.

Speaking to reporters after launching the "Youth in Nation Building" exhibition organised by MCA Youth in Kuala Lumpur, Dr Mahathir said there is no actual beefing up of military strength but only strong claims by several countries over the islands.

"I believe that the problem of Spratly could be resolved amicably," he said.

Six countries — China, Brunei, Taiwan, the Philippines, Vietnam and Malaysia — claim the islands in whole or in part. The dispute worsened recently when in May China gave oil exploration rights to **Crestone** Energy in a zone claimed by Vietnam. The US company said the Chinese had guaranteed military protection.