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## Don't doubt China's sincerity, Dr M tells Asean

ALOR STAR: Asean should not doubt China's sincerity to resolve the dispute over the Spratly islands, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

The Prime Minister said China's preparedness to shelve its claim of sovereignty over the islands should be welcomed.

"We cannot read people's minds, but it is evident that they are ready to negotiate a peaceful solution," he said.

"They have even proposed a

joint economic exploitation of the Spratlys. I would like to thank China. We should not make allegations about their insincerity."

Dr Mahathir said a peaceful solution to the dispute was vital as the United States, which was withdrawing its military presence from the region, was closely monitoring developments.

"If we fight among ourselves, it shows that South-East Asian countries cannot

manage their affairs," he said.

"The US will then have a leeway to return to its role as policemen and peg us under their command."

Dr Mahathir said South-East Asia must prove to the world that it could safeguard regional peace without the interference of third parties.

"China's preparedness to work out a peaceful solution over the Spratlys dispute presents us that opportunity," he added.

Asked whether the other claimants should follow China's example of shelving its claim pending peaceful negotiations, Dr Mahathir said the dispute should be resolved based on the law.

On the Khmer Rouge's refusal to adhere to the second phase of the Paris peace accord, Dr Mahathir said it should realise that the international community could pressure it with "equally tough measures."