

PM: New rules needed to make strait safer

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By WONG CHUN WAI

KUALA LUMPUR: New rules are urgently needed to regulate the Straits of Malacca to make the busy waterway safer, Datuk Seri D. M. Maniam Ahmad said yesterday.

He said regulations governing the use of the strait were outdated and should be re-written.

The Cabinet, he said had proposed that Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Thailand meet to discuss ways to improve the safety of the waterway.

Dr Mahathir said there was almost a "state of lawlessness" in the 1,000km-long strait in terms of the passage of ships through various narrow channels.

"We have to pay a high price not because of ourselves but because people use the passageway," he said after opening the first Asean Congress here.

The Prime Minister said the proposed conference would be held as soon as possible "as we don't know when the next accident will be."

"When pirates board these big ships and tie up the crew, the ships are left to sail on their own for miles. What happens when the direction is wrong?" he asked.

"They might land on our beaches. You can't stop a ship immediately like a car. It needs three or four miles before it can stop. We are too close and

we are very concerned," he added.

It is estimated 40,000 vessels use the strait every year or about 3,000 a month.

Five major accidents have occurred since June, the latest being the Japanese oil tanker *Nagasaki Spirit* colliding with the container ship *Ocean Blessing* which left 21 people dead and 20 missing.

Dr Mahathir said the world must contribute towards the maintenance of the strait, adding that Malaysia had been told it could not impose toll because it was international waters.

He said times had changed and that the rules were drawn up

when the maritime powers were elsewhere.

"The world cannot just claim it (the strait) as theirs and not be prepared to pay for it. Some form of payment must be made to some authority which would be responsible for keeping the strait open and reduce any danger to shipping," he said.

Last month, Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi brought up the problems of the strait at the UN General Assembly, calling for a review of the existing international maritime law and regulations.

There was also a need to share the responsibility of ensuring safe navigation and combat growing piracy.