

World needs governments undaunted by

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PM: Leaders must

changes, Americans told

be strong

From Zainon Ahmad

NEW YORK, Fri. — The world needs strong governments led by strong leaders who are undaunted by changes, which they examine and intelligently engineer, and are unafraid even of questioning democracy and its attendant ideas, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

He said the world's problems at the end of the Cold War were legion and for the United Nations to function effectively to solve them, these leaders must lend the support of their countries.

"The time has come for rethinking the unthinkable," he said when speaking on "Leadership in the post-Cold War era: The challenge of change" at a luncheon of the Council of Foreign Relations, a prestigious private think-tank, yesterday.

Council president Leslie Gelb introduced him as a respected regional and international leader.

Dr Mahathir said as a result of serious conflicts everywhere, the world clearly needed strong leadership of the kind that looked beyond national boundaries.

He said the answer to why this was lacking "may lie in the corruption of democracy".

Elaborating on the problems, he pointed, among other things, to the resurfacing of the age-old ethnic and nationalistic antagonism, subdued for sometime by authoritarian rule.

A whole ethnic group was being exterminated in Bosnia-Herzegovina in full view of everyone, aided by a misguided arms embargo, and thousands died in the fighting in Nagorno-Karabakh, Abkhazia and elsewhere.

"A leaderless world merely stands by to watch without extending a helping hand," said the Prime Minister.

In the field of trade, leaders merely submitted to domestic pressures and policies, damaging in the long-run, which were made for narrow short-term political interests. Critical international economics and social development issues remained intractable, and developing countries continued to be marginalised.

Yet when the G-7 met recently in Tokyo, they were led by "incredible" leaders — leaders who had no credible support at home because they had support-ratings well below a democratic majority.

Dr Mahathir said: "These nations are weak in practically all fields because they practise a distorted form of democracy — a democracy that stresses form rather than substance.

"Democracy has become an article of faith wherein its worship is far more important than the practical results obtained from it."

He said it was dangerous to make a religion out of an ideology and alluded to the consequences suffered by the Russians for their unquestioning acceptance of communism for 70 years.

But what the Russians did to communism, others were now doing to democracy, he said, adding that in as much as the communists were intolerant, the democrats, particularly the liberal democrats, were intolerant.

Those who questioned the wisdom of even the less fundamental of democratic practices risked excommunication and would be branded and hounded by the democratic Press and fanatical democrats.

The Prime Minister said: "I am a democrat and Malaysia is a democratic country. Americans will most probably smile at this assertion. But we in Malaysia will continue to insist that we

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'Democracy is not a religion'

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are democratic.

"Our view is that democracy is not a religion, that it is merely a political system, that it is not perfect. It is not a cure-all for social, political and economic maladies.

"Indeed, democratic fanaticism is more likely to create social, political and economic problems rather than cure them."

He attributed the present malady assailing the Western nations, the weakness in their leadership in particular, to their practice of democratic extremism.

Dr Mahathir said when democracy was first defined, it meant merely a system of government by the people, but since then many new qualifications have been added, without which a popular government would not be regarded as democratic.

He said most democratic governments, which should in the first place have more than 50 per cent of their

people supporting them, fail this test.

In the West, where voter turn-out seldom reached 50 per cent, it was possible that a government supported by 26 per cent of the voters would be deemed to be "democratically elected".

Such governments were usually weak as desertion by one or two members would bring them down, he said.

Picking on the principle of majority rule, Dr Mahathir said the majority of the people were not always right, citing the example of the majority of the Serbs who voted for the genocidal government of Slobodan Milosevic.

And the majority could very often be oppressive of the minority.

Referring to other things wrong with the practice of democracy, he alluded to the arrogance of power of the media before whom the most powerful politicians cringed.

Then there was the power

of the trade unions, the power of pressure groups, the lobbyists, the non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the local party bosses.

"Democracy and the free market is not a God-given system. It certainly is not religion. It is only one of the devices to meet the problems of human society," he said.

Therefore, ideas like majority rule, minority rights, freedom from oppression, freedom from hunger, freedom of association, freedom of the Press and the right to free speech, transparency, the rule of law and a host of other thoughts linked directly or obliquely to democracy needed to be examined.

He said the time had come for rethinking the unthinkable and that was the challenge that faced the world today.

"Unless there are leaders from the powerful nations willing to face this challenge, the world will be led by 'incredible' leaders."