

Pullout from Somalia by end of year

By Sharanjit Singh

AYER HITAM (KEDAH), Sun. - Malaysia will withdraw its peacekeeping troops from Somalia by the end of the year, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said the Government had decided to do so because the contingent was not achieving anything there, adding that Malaysia felt that its troops were not effective as other forces were being withdrawn.

"We can't be there to do work which requires a great number of people ... we are just a small group," he told reporters after visiting the

home of Prebet Azehar Shuib, 23, who was killed in an accident in Mogadishu, Somalia, on Oct 23. Also present was Perlis Menteri Besar Tan Sri Dr Abdul Hamid Pawanteh.

The Prime Minister was responding to questions by reporters, who had asked him for comments on Malaysian troops in Somalia.

Malaysia has 968 troops, serving under the United Nations Operation in Somalia (Unosom II) including the seventh Battalion Royal Malay Regiment (Mechanised) which assumed the role of Malbatt III from July this year. It is led by Kol Rosli Yusof.

Azehar, a Special Forces member in Malbatt III, was killed when his armoured personnel carrier overturned while descending a slope after a mission to supply water to a group of Malaysian soldiers.

Five Malaysians soldiers have been killed and more than a dozen wounded since Malaysia despatched troops to Somalia in July last year.

The Prime Minister, asked if the Government's decision contradicted its initial stand to help the people of Somalia, said:

"We want to help and we can help ... not only Islamic countries but also others.

"The situation in Somalia

is such that the civil war there has pitted fellow Muslims who are greedy for power against one another. We were supposed to be there to help ensure that aid from other countries reached the starving people.

"This was our mission ... however, it looks like we can't help them," he said.

Dr Mahathir said the United Nations had also failed to be firm in its stand when dealing with the deployment of troops in war-torn countries.

"Whenever there are soldiers killed, they (the countries) pull out their troops ... as was the case in Rwanda. When the war started they

pulled out their troops.

"This resulted in up to 500,000 Rwandan people being killed ... we are not happy with such actions," he said.

He said the United Nations should stop giving false promises of upholding human rights when they had failed to do so in the past.

Asked if the decision to withdraw the troops had been forwarded to the UN, the Prime Minister said Malaysia had made its intentions and views known on many occasions.

"I have written letters to

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UN, major powers informed of withdrawal plan

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the UN secretary-general (Boutros Boutros-Ghali), to all relevant heads of Governments, the Prime Ministers of Britain and France and also to President (Bill) Clinton.

"The only hope is that President Clinton has been much more receptive ... the British and the French are totally against putting their troops at risk at all.

"This is something which we do not mind ... they don't want to put their troops at risk but at the same time they put the Bosnians at risk by not giving them arms to defend themselves," he added.

Asked if the withdrawal would be done in stages, the Prime Minister said the matter would be organised by the Defence Ministry.

"However, we have to arrange the withdrawal properly, otherwise they (the troops) would be at risk."

In January this year, Jen Datuk Aboo Samah Aboo Bakar assumed the post of Unosom II military commander, taking over from Lt-Gen Cervik Bir of Turkey.

Malbatt I joined troops from 28 other countries which made up the Unosom II peacekeeping force in July 1993.

Kpl Mat Aznan Awang was killed in a battle between UN forces and Somali rebels at Bakara Market in the Somalia capital of Mogadishu on Oct 4, last year when his armoured personnel carrier, with nine colleagues, on a rescue mission to save American soldiers were attacked by militiamen.

On July 19, this year, S Sjn Azman Mohd Tahir of the 21st Special Forces Group and Kpl Gani a.k Bin-joi of the 6th Battalion Royal Rangers Regiment were killed when a three-vehicle UN convoy they were escorting came under ambush in Mogadishu.

Two other soldiers, Sjn Zaidi Hanafiah and L/Kpl Ahmed Abdul Rahman, were injured in the attack on the convoy which was on an intelligence gathering mission.

On Oct 15, Kpl Abdul Kadir Bakir, 40, from Sarawak, was killed when his APC which was escorting a UN logistics convoy hit a crater in the road during heavy rain before turning turtle and landing on him in south Mogadishu.

Another soldier, Prebet Azhar Hashim, in the vehi-

cle was slightly injured.

On Oct 23, trooper Azehar Shuib, 25, was killed when the APC he was in overturned outside Mogadishu. Another soldier, Kpl Razak Alias, 31, was injured in the incident.

The United States and European forces pulled out of Somalia by March 31 this year.

Meanwhile, Rosli confirmed that the situation in Somalia was still critical.

He said in a telephone interview from Mogadishu that in the past two months, the warring parties had clashed a few times without heed to the presence of the United Nations troops.

"There is still no consensus between the disputants but efforts are being made by the UN and others to enforce a ceasefire," he said.

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