

17 DEC 1998

LEAD Mahathir-Iraq

MALAYSIA AGAINST AIR STRIKES IN IRAQ, SAYS MAHATHIR

HANOI, Dec 17 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Malaysia is against the US-led air strikes on Iraq today as it does not favour the use of force to settle any disputes.

"We don't think that there should be any use of force," he told reporters after talks with his Singapore counterpart Goh Chok Tong here today.

Dr Mahathir and Goh were here to attend the Sixth Asean Summit which ended yesterday.

Dr Mahathir reiterated that Malaysia is against the use of force of any kind to settle problems or disputes.

"We have always held to that view," he said at the end of his four-day trip to Vietnam.

"We don't think that there should be any use of force. We see force as being used more for the interest of people who apply force, not because of human rights violations," Dr Mahathir said.

He was commenting on the air attacks which the United States and Britain launched against Iraq for failing to comply with a United Nations resolution on chemical weapons inspections.

Dr Mahathir said people in Kosovo were being killed "but we don't see any application of the same kind of force".

He said in Iraq's case, its neighbours have not asked that Iraq should be attacked.

He said there were other more serious breaches of law where action should be taken.

Iraq was hit by cruise missiles and other bombs early today, a day before the US House of Representatives was due to begin debating whether to impeach President Bill Clinton over the Monica Lewinsky sex scandal.

The raids followed evacuation of UN weapons inspectors from Baghdad after they accused Iraq of ceasing cooperation.

The US had reportedly deployed more than 200 aircraft and 20 warships, including 15 B-52 bombers, to the Gulf region carrying with them more than 400 cruise missiles and other bombs.

In KUALA LUMPUR, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi condemned the unilateral military strikes against Iraq.

"This violates the principle of peaceful settlement of disputes and the Charter of the United Nations," he said in a statement released by Wisma Putra.

Abdullah said the unilateral action on Iraq has set a dangerous precedent and Malaysia urged member countries of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) to oppose in the strongest manner this action by the U.S.

"Malaysia counsels dialogue and consultation which is essential to maintain the credibility of the United Nations process to monitor Iraq's disarmament programme. Malaysia sees no justification for the military action which constitutes an aggression against Iraq and which has also undermined the mandate of the UN Security Council," he said.

An emergency session of the UN Security Council should be convened immediately to discuss the situation and to bring a stop to the military action against Iraq, he said.

"Iraq on its part must also ensure full compliance with UN Security Council resolutions. The eight-year-old sanctions have already exacted an

excessive toll on Iraq and its people and, in this regard, the latest US military strikes are totally ill-conceived. They only further undermine peace and security in the region.

"Force cannot be used as a means to deal with international disputes except where aggression has been committed or where massacres have been perpetrated as in Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina," he said.

Malaysia urged the US and Britain to cease forthwith their military action against Iraq.

Defence Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said a show of military might was not the answer to resolving the UN stand-off with Iraq.

"(They) have to settle it through negotiations and we always maintain that military involvement would not do much good but would only victimise innocent people who have nothing to do at all with the conflict," he told reporters at Parliament House lobby.

Asked whether the air strikes were Clinton's attempt at diverting world attention from his sex scandal, Syed Hamid said: "Even if we have to divert attention from internal problems, it should not bring miseries to other nations."

The Gerakan also strongly condemned the US strikes on Iraq, saying they were carried out totally based on the report of one person, Richard Butler, chief of the UN weapons inspection team.

"The US has taken one too many themselves, they should be condemned for taking this unilateral action in order to attack a defenceless country," said party president Datuk Seri Dr Lim Keng Yaik.

Lim, who is Primary Industries Minister, said the UN Security Council should call for a meeting to censure the US action.

"Otherwise, we might as well disband the UN Security Council and the UN General Assembly and let the United States rule the world," he said.

He said the air strikes against Iraq were deplorable and that no country should accept the misuse of brutal force which undermined the role of the United Nations.

Asked if he thought Clinton was trying to divert attention from his impeachment proceedings, Lim said: "Whatever it is, the world can draw one conclusion that the President of the US is using others to divert attention from his own problem."

"If it is true it is a very fiendish act which brings the politics of the US into gutter politics."

Opposition parties also joined in the protest against the bombing of Iraq.

DAP secretary-general and Opposition Leader Lim Kit Siang said the move was a cynical use of force by Clinton to save his presidency from impeachment by the US House of Representatives.

The move was unacceptable as the air strikes took place when the UN Security Council was holding an emergency meeting to discuss the report by Butler, he said.

"In bombing Iraq when the UN Security Council was in an emergency meeting on the Iraq crisis, the United States government has shown not only utter contempt for the world body but is guilty of a blatant pursuit of the personal agenda of the United States President in complete disregard of international opinion and must be deplored by the international community," he said in a statement.

Parti Rakyat Malaysia (PRM) said the timing of the air strikes was questionable in view of the impending impeachment proceedings against Clinton.

"Now, owing to this military development, it has been put on hold," said PRM president Dr Syed Husin Ali.

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also condemned the US and Britain

for the air strikes.

Suara Rakyat Malaysia (Suaram) urged all peace-loving nations to pressure the International Court to prosecute the US and Britain for the "gross criminal act" against the people of Iraq.

"The actions by the US and Britain have gone beyond any rational and humanitarian reasons. Iraq should not be made a victim merely to cover up Clinton's political future or his sexual habits," said its coordinator S.Arutchelvan.

The Malaysian Sociological Research Institute (MSRI) said: "It does not take a hero to hit a largely unprotected civilian population. The price of America's hostility to the Iraqi people as an agent of Israel? - has been the death of hundreds of thousands of Iraqi kids," it said.

Umno Youth also slammed the US for the attack, noting that it had come at a time when Clinton was grappling with his personal problems.

It only showed that there was no balance of power in this world and big and arrogant powers like the US could resort to indiscriminate military action, its acting chief Datuk Hishammuddin Tun Hussein told reporters in Kuala Lumpur.

Hishammudin, who is Deputy Primary Industries Minister, said Umno Youth's condemnation of the US did not mean that it supported everything Iraq did.

In KANGAR, Perlis Menteri Besar Datuk Seri Shahidan Kassim likened the US action to that of a coward.

Iraq had been impoverished by the UN economic sanctions and the US exploited this to trample on a small country, he said in a statement.

He called on Muslims to pray for the safety of the innocent people in Iraq.

In RANTAU PANJANG, Minister in the Prime Minister's Department Datuk Dr Abdul Hamid Othman said the attack had caused suffering among the Iraqi population.

He said the US-led attack was against humanity and democracy.

"In a democracy, whatever crisis should be resolved through negotiations and not through violence," he said after visiting government staff on duty at the Malaysian-Thai border.

Umno Youth International Bureau secretary Mustapha Yaakub also condemned the attack, saying Clinton was trying to divert attention from impeachment proceedings against him.

"The Umno Youth International Bureau urges all Islamic countries to voice their strong objection to the attack," said Mustapha who accompanied Abdul Hamid on the visit.

-- BERNAMA

TM YBY