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`Settle conflict through talks'

THE conflict between the US and Iraq over Baghdad's refusal to allow weapons inspection should be resolved through negotiations, not military action, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

"I hope this matter is settled through negotiations, and I welcome Russian efforts to bring it to the conference table.

"If Iraq is bombed, innocent lives will be killed ... diplomacy is the best way to solve the dispute," Dr Mahathir told reporters at his Hari Raya open house at Sri Perdana yesterday.

The Prime Minister was asked to comment on the stand-off between the US and Iraq. The US had earlier warned it would take military action against Iraq if UN-mandated inspections were not allowed.

Dr Mahathir said if the US proceeded with its plan to take military action against Iraq, many innocent lives would be lost.

It was reported that Russian and French leaders, as well as United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, all want the situation to be resolved through diplomacy.

US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright met with French and Russian foreign ministers, hoping to put pressure on President Saddam Hussein to back down and allow inspections of weapons sites.

Albright said the US is prepared to unleash its formidable naval and air power assembled in the Gulf, even without international backing to ensure an end to Iraq's biological, chemical and nuclear weapons programmes.

Later, Albright said attempts to resolve the crisis diplomatically were "all but exhausted" and the time was fast approaching to make fundamental decisions concerning Iraq.

"Albright's statement that unilateral action will be taken, even without support from the international community does not reflect the spirit of joint action," Dr Mahathir said.

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