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Asean should take the lead in East Timor peacekeeping, says PM

Zainul Arifin in New York

MALAYSIA feels that Asean should take the lead in the peacekeeping operation in East Timor, from what it sees as the heavy-handed approach of the Australian-led multinational force.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad also feels that Australia should scale down the size of its forces and be less belligerent in the way it is going about securing peace and disarming the militias in East Timor.

"I saw pictures of Australian troops pointing guns at almost anybody. Is it necessary to point guns at people who are obviously unarmed?"

While a strong military presence could be one of the approaches to handle the situation in East Timor, there were other ways than flexing military might, he told a Press conference at the United Nations after delivering his speech at the General Assembly on Wednesday.

Asean, he said, was ready to contribute peacekeepers at any time but would require UN funding for the mission.

In an immediate response, Australian Prime Minister John Howard rejected the statement by Dr Mahathir that Australian troops in East Timor had been "heavy-handed" and that their numbers should be cut.

"The Government categorically rejects the criticism made by Dr Mahathir. The Australian forces have behaved impeccably and they have brought very great pride to the Australian nation," Howard told Parliament in Canberra.

"There is therefore no justification for an allegation of belligerence or any other kind of behaviour outside the mandate given by the United Nations and I emphatically and categorically reject the claims made by the Prime Minister of Malaysia.

"We would welcome increased participation in the multinational force by Asean countries, we would particularly welcome a larger contribution from Malaysia," he added.

The Australian-led multinational force was authorised under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter.

Under Chapter VII, the world body may authorise member countries to take steps to restore peace anywhere in the world.

The spirit in the formation of the multinational force was not unlike that of the alliance formed to get Iraq out of Kuwait in 1991. In the East Timor case, the deployment of the multinational force was agreed upon by Indonesia.

The force would not operate under the United Nations flag, and the soldiers would not be donning the traditional peacekeepers' blue helmets, but instead the colours representing each of their countries.

Participating countries pay for their own deployment, unlike in peacekeeping operations which are financed by the United Nations.

Dr Mahathir said he brought up the issue of the strong military presence in East Timor, especially the large Australian contingent, with UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, when they met earlier in the day.

Annan said Australia's big force was necessary because other countries were not sending troops.

Dr Mahathir questioned the wisdom of pressuring Indonesia to hold the referendum on East Timor at a time when the country was weakened by economic and political problems.

While Jakarta was unable to campaign for the integration of East Timor with Indonesia, the pro-independence movement was being assisted by