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Mahathir-Timor

M'SIA WANTS ASEAN TO HANDLE EAST TIMOR PEACE-KEEPING JOB

By: Amin Husaini Harun

NEW YORK, Sept 30 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Wednesday that Asean should take over the peace keeping operations in East Timor from Australia which seems to be rather heavy handed in the handling of the situation there.

Dr Mahathir said he had brought up Australia's belligerency in East Timor when he called on United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan before addressing the UN General Assembly Wednesday morning.

Speaking at a Press conference after the address, Dr Mahathir said he had told Annan that Australia should scale down its forces in the beleaguered territory.

East Timorese had overwhelmingly voted for independence from Indonesia in last Aug 30 referendum.

"I raised the matter of Australia's rather heavy handed handling of the problem in East Timor and I feel that Australia should scale down its forces and allow Asean to take up peace keeping and handle it less belligerently than it is now," he said.

Asked to elaborate on Australia's belligerent actions, he said: "I saw pictures of Australian troops pointing guns at almost anybody. Is it necessary to point guns at people who are obviously unarmed?"

Dr Mahathir said he felt that everywhere there was too much participation and the use of pressure by big western countries that he believed a lot of people had also felt threatened because of that.

He said Malaysia was taking the initiative for Asean to take over the East Timor peacekeeping job from Australia, but it did not mean that Asean countries should be sending a big force to carry out military operations there.

"There are other ways in settling the problem in East Timor than by pointing guns at the people," the prime minister said.

Asean groups Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Asked about Annan's reaction, Dr Mahathir said the UN secretary-general explained that Australia had to send a big force to East Timor because other countries had not sent troops there.

According to Dr Mahathir, Annan said that however, should there be more troops from other countries, "it would be necessary to scale down Australia's participation".

Dr Mahathir reiterated that Indonesia should not in the first place be forced to hold a referendum at a time when the entire republic was facing problems and was very weak.

The referendum was held without giving Indonesia a chance to campaign unlike the other side which was promised all kinds of support from foreigners that as a result the East Timorese overwhelmingly voted for independence.

"Of course, the people who wanted to be part of Indonesia felt they had been cheated and they reacted in the only way they know. But we had to handle them properly.

"Sending a big army to put down the situation, maybe one of the solutions, but whenever we, including Malaysia, tried to stop the mob from rampaging and burning things, the video cameras are there. Once we touched a rioter, it's going to be shown on CNN 24 hours a day for the next one week making it as if the country is unstable," he said.

The prime minister said that since there was now a big foreign military presence in East Timor, these troops were bound to use force, but the force they applied would not be advertised in the kind of way that other people's use of force was advertised worldwide.

On Malaysia's selective currency controls to tackle the economic turmoil, Dr Mahathir suggested that they could be used as an alternative to those of the IMF.

"Maybe not exactly the way Malaysia does because your own position could be different but control is just one of the ways to overcome currency manipulation by outside forces," he said, replying to a question whether Malaysia would recommend it to other countries facing economic downturn.

To another question, he said Malaysia had gone past the worst but could not say whether the situation was the same in other countries also affected by the economic crisis.

He said that quite recently crisis-hit countries came under another attack, and if the attack was similar to that of 1997/1998, then the region could expect another turmoil.

To overcome this problem, the prime minister said the world financial architecture should be changed so that currency traders were not allowed a free hand to handle huge sum of money to destabilise governments or economies.

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