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Mahathir-Timor

MULTINATIONAL FORCE IN E.TIMOR SHOULD CONCENTRATE ON BRINGING PEACE

SINGAPORE, Oct 18 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the Australian-led multinational force in East Timor should concentrate on how to bring about peace and not have the idea to fight certain groups.

"We think that forces from outside which go into a country like that should concentrate on how to bring about peace," he told a news conference after delivering a keynote address at the World Economic Forum's Eighth East Asia Economic Summit, here.

Dr Mahathir said they should try to contact the groups and tell them that it is not worthwhile to fight.

"That's what we would do. We are not against the militias and the East Timorese... we want peace," he said, adding that Malaysia would like to see the UN force in East Timor led by an Asian country, particularly from Asean.

He also said that Malaysia was prepared to take leadership of the multinational force if asked to do so.

The Malaysian armed forces team in the UN multinational force in East Timor comprises 16 officers and 13 soldiers of other ranks. Army First Division Fifth Infantry Brigade commander based in Lok Kawi in Sabah Brig-Gen Datuk Mohamed Khalid Saad is the leader of the Malaysian team.

The multinational force or International Force in East Timor (Interfet) commanded by Australian Major General Peter Cosgrove was deployed to bring order to the troubled territory whose population voted for independence from Indonesia in a referendum in August.

Some Asean countries, particularly Malaysia, have recently voiced their dissatisfaction over the Australia-led multinational force which has been said to use a "heavy-handed approach" in the East Timor peacekeeping operation.

Malaysia had also called for Australia to scale down the size of its troops to let Asean peacekeepers have a stronger presence in East Timor. To date there are a total of 5,651 multinational troops in East Timor of which 4,303 are Australian and the rest from other countries.

Dr Mahathir said: "We have nothing... we are not biased against the East Timorese and it is wrong to assume that we don't like them. We were hoping that when they become independent, they would join Asean but obviously someone has been telling them that they should not join Asean and they have made a declaration of not joining Asean."

When asked if the 10-member grouping would persuade East Timor to reconsider joining Asean, the prime minister said that Asean was open.

"I don't think we should force anybody to join us if they don't like to join us," he said.

East Timor was engulfed in bloodshed, much of it at the hands of anti-independence militias and departing Indonesian troops, last month after it voted on Aug 30 to end Indonesian rule.

There were also fears that the militias, aided by the military, would destabilise East Timor and other neighbouring parts of the archipelago.

-- BERNAMA

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