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Dr Mahathir: Israel's actions against Palestinians an assault on Islamic unity

Farush Khan in Doha

DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Israel's "cowardly acts" in killing innocent Palestinians were an assault on Muslim honour and unity.

The Prime Minister said it was sad that Muslim countries which made up more than a third of the membership of the United Nations, watched helplessly as Israel continued "with impunity and arrogance" to kill the innocent.

"Such is the dire state of Muslim countries that we are unable to respond effectively to the challenge posed by the cowardly acts of Israel," he said at the ninth Islamic summit conference here.

Dr Mahathir spoke on behalf of the Asian group.

The three-day summit which began yesterday is attended by leaders of the 56 Organisation of Islamic Conference member countries.

He said the current development in the Middle East called for unity and solidarity within the ummah.

"What is happening to the Palestinians could obviously happen to us also. Indeed in Yugoslavia and Chechnya and elsewhere it is happening. Must we wait until all of us are ground into the ground before we appreciate the need to act?"

Dr Mahathir said to ensure the OIC renewed its relevance and effectiveness, reform must be rooted in a new consensus among Governments.

"I am keenly aware of the complexities of the task. Its success requires changes in structure and methodology or work. It must involve mutually reinforcing actions by Governments and by the secretariat."

He also said it was high time OIC countries enhanced trade and economic co-operation among themselves.

Dr Mahathir said a well-planned programme could promote Muslim direct investment (MDI) in OIC countries.

He said under this plan, Muslim investors in capital-rich countries should be encouraged to invest in Muslim countries with know-how and technology but lacking in capital.

Entrepreneurs in these countries can also team up to invest in resource-rich Muslim countries which lack both capital and skills.

Many products now imported by Muslim countries can be sourced from other Muslim countries without sacrificing quality or cost.

He said to draw investments and industries to Muslim countries, the investment environment needed to be attractive.

"Changing conditions already agreed upon when an investment was made for whatever reasons, including political, will discourage further investments. Internal problems should not be taken out on FDI or MDI."

Acknowledging that the Islamic Development Bank had been doing a good job in project financing, he said it could do more in countries facing difficulty gaining access to funds.

"The Islamic banking system can ensure that the banks maintain an active interest in the affairs of the enterprises."

He said should the OIC redefine and refocus itself to keep up with the times, the ummah over the next 20 to 30 years might be able to adjust to the globalised world and the Information Age.

The Prime Minister said it was the "bounden duty" of leaders of the OIC countries to "ensure that this will happen".

He ended his speech by offering to host the 10th session of the

triennial Islamic Summit Conference in Kuala Lumpur in 2003. Gambia has also made the offer.

Dr Mahathir also spoke on the differences among the Muslims and the difficulties encountered by the OIC in the past which had, for the most part, been due to conflict of interests, ideology and the desire for hegemony by member states themselves.

"We should forget all these. None of us are going to succeed in forcing the billion Muslims to be standardised according to our wish.

"We should accept our differences and focus instead on co-operation among us."

The reform of the OIC, he said, should be directed towards strengthening its role, particularly in line with the theme of this summit - Peace and Development.

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