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OIC members urged to take action over Jerusalem issue

Zainul Arifin in Doha

DOHA, Mon: Several leaders of the Muslim world meeting here, outraged by the daily events of the Israel-Palestine clashes, have upped the ante in their condemnation of the Jewish state by urging members of the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) to review their ties with any country which moves its embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

Israel has unilaterally named Jerusalem to be its new capital in place of Tel Aviv, and has been urging countries it has ties with to move their diplomatic offices there. Several countries, including the US, have at one time or another mulled the idea.

The Palestinians claim it to be theirs and many Muslims are opposed to the idea of Jerusalem, one of the holy cities of Islam, belonging to Israel.

The city is also known as Al Quds Al Sharif and Baitulmuqadis. Jerusalem was once controlled by Jordan and conquered by Israel in 1967. It contains sites holy to Muslims, Christians and Jews.

The issue of Jerusalem took on a new dimension with the city being the centre of recent violence following clashes between Palestinian and Israeli forces. The death toll has increased to more than 200, with most casualties being Arabs and Palestinians.

"(Some leaders) openly denounced the US, for instance, to the extent that some even proposed diplomatic relations with the US be severed if it shifts its embassy to Al Quds.

"We see that this time the words are tougher. I am confident that if there were no response to the OIC stand, many OIC countries would act," Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir told Malaysian journalists yesterday evening.

He is here attending the two-day OIC summit, which has been dominated by the Palestinian issue.

Dr Mahathir had earlier lamented the inability of Muslim nations, despite their numbers and influence, to be united in dealing with Israel's impunity and arrogance. As a result, Muslim nations' voices were not taken seriously.

He also described the atrocities as an assault to Muslim honour and unity.

Apart from Israel, much of the anger expressed by leaders at the meeting seemed to be directed at the US, which is seen as an unquestionable backer of the Jewish state. Washington, many believe, seems unable to find fault with Tel Aviv despite overwhelming international opinion and evidence to the contrary.

A surprise proponent of severing ties to countries moving their offices from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was Saudi Arabia, a strong US ally in West Asia.

Crown Prince Abdullah Abdul Aziz Al-Saud also urged Islamic countries either to freeze or to drastically cut their relations with Israel until the Jewish state shows signs of trying to resolve the long-standing issue with the Palestinians.

The leaders at the end of their meeting are expected to be united in their condemnation of Israel and to call for members with ties to Israel to cut them. Twenty member nations of OIC - mostly African and Central Asian nations - have full diplomatic relations with Israel.

Several major states, such as Egypt, Jordan and Turkey, with diplomatic

relations with Israel have said that while they deplore the country's actions, they felt that the purpose of resolving the crisis would not be advanced with the Palestinian causes.

The meeting, ending tomorrow, is also expected to call for United Nations involvement in the troubled areas and to call for the trial of Israeli leaders for war crimes and crimes against humanity.

Dr Mahathir, commenting on the summit, said the OIC had proven to be too unwieldy and needed to be reformed. With 56 members, the summits had proven to be difficult if all were to attend.

OIC must find a mechanism for reform. The Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, for example, is willing to trust the Group of Eight countries to talk on its behalf but Islamic countries have yet to be willing to give the authority to fellow Muslim nations.