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`Muslims being targeted'

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - The American-led war against terror is beginning to look more like a war against Muslims, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

He said there was talk of extending the war to Iraq even though there was no evidence that it harboured Osama bin Laden or his followers. He said there was, in fact, vague evidence that those responsible for the anthrax letters were not Muslim Arabs but rightist Christians.

"Yet, while there is talk about attacking Iraq, there is no violent rage against the spreaders of anthrax or (Timothy) McVeigh's supporters," he said, referring to the man who had blown up a government building in Oklahoma.

He was delivering the keynote address at a Conference on Terrorism organised by the Institute of Strategic and International Studies.

He said despite the protests that the war was not against Islam, it could not be denied that only Muslim terrorists were being targeted.

Dr Mahathir said the anti-Islam impression could only be dispelled if action was also taken against those who terrorised Muslims, for example the Israelis.

He said the definition of terrorism must be based on the acts of terror, not a person's affiliation to any group, religion or race. And even if the person's cause was noble, acts of terror would not be justified.

"As a terrorist, he should be outlawed by the world, should be hunted, captured, tried and appropriately punished," he said.

He said terrorists must not be glorified but their minds must be understood, otherwise the causes of terrorism would not be removed.

"I believe that the principal cause is the Palestinian issue."

He added that more Palestinians were killed than Jews but it was the former which were deemed as terrorists. While the Arabs had recognised Israel, there was no reciprocal recognition of Palestine.

He said while the world might not be prepared to punish the Israelis, it could protect the Palestinians by having a United Nations peacekeeping force there but the Israelis objected.

The Prime Minister said there was a great deal of anger in the Muslim world which the West could not understand. The Muslims saw the West as anti-Palestine, anti-Arab and anti-Muslim.

If there was no Palestinian issue, there would not be those willing to kill themselves in the horrible fashion as they had on Sept 11.

"The belief that these terrorists acted in that manner because of poverty or because of jealousy for the good life and the freedom of other people does not reflect a deep knowledge of the terrorist mind.

"Those who hijacked and crashed the aircraft are not fanatical illiterates who only see heaven in after-life," he said.

Dr Mahathir also said all terrorists must be the target for elimination, including state terrorists like the "Israeli Government of Ariel Sharon, the man responsible for the massacre of thousands and who is still behind the systematic killings of the Palestinians today".

He said Malaysia was familiar with terrorists after 42 years of fighting them until they laid down arms in 1990. They did so because the Government had wooed away their civilian support.

"Identifying and hunting the terrorists will be very difficult and will take a long time. The better immediate solution is to remove the causes of

terrorism.

"We may not want to do so because we do not like to give the impression that the terrorists have succeeded. But such an attitude will not help," he said.

At a dialogue, Dr Mahathir agreed that one cause of terrorism could be a sense of injustice felt by the people against oppressive regimes of their countries.

Responding to a question by Khairy Jamaluddin, special officer to Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, Dr Mahathir said such a sense of injustice must be corrected but not through acts of terror.

"Acts of terror cannot be justified simply because your cause is right," he said.

He also said while violence might be justified if there was no other way to free the country from oppression, terrorism could never be justified.

Terrorism, he said, was acts which targeted the innocent.

He agreed that the world must listen to calls for independence but it had to be careful because there were many separatist movements being funded by those who wanted to destabilise a country.

"Once you go into these things, so many countries may want to (split up). The State of Perlis, for example, might want to and people might just finance them, and we will have trouble!"

Speaking to reporters later, he said he had written to US President George W. Bush asking America to stop its attacks on Afghanistan.

He had told Bush that if the war was against the Taliban, ground forces should move in as this would cause less damage and they could get their targets more accurately.

He hoped that there would be an early end to the war after the Northern Alliance moved into Kabul, although he said the Taliban might have merely moved to a safer place to regroup.

"I think we can say that the first round has gone to the Northern Alliance. I pray that they will be successful without too many lives sacrificed," he said.

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