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Asean must not take part in war, says PM

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KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - With the threat of war looming as America prepares to strike Afghanistan, Asean must take on a moderating role and oppose war, even while taking a firm stand against terrorism, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said tonight.

"Asean should be a moderating force, urging for an end to war. We should not participate in war. If we do, it will only escalate the problem," Dr Mahathir said on TV3's new talk show In Conversation tonight.

He was interviewed by four Asean television journalists: TV3 news and current affairs department general manager Datuk Chamil Wariya, the Philippines' ABS-CBN Korina Sanchez, ITV Thailand's Chib Jitniyom and RCTI Indonesia's Roy Tindage.

Dr Mahathir was asked what he thought the Asean scenario would be if war broke out.

"It is not fair to have an all-out war against Afghanistan. There the people may not like their Taliban Government but have no means of overthrowing them. In a war, those who dislike the Taliban are also going to be killed."

While stressing that Asean must oppose terrorism, Dr Mahathir said military action was not the solution.

"When you fight terrorists you fight an invisible enemy. If you are going to fight terrorists worldwide, you must look into the causes."

He said this was the approach Malaysia took in removing the Communists.

"Our answer was to give the Chinese citizenship in this country by law, give them opportunities to participate in government, give the community support and land."

Dr Mahathir believed that the United States would be able to handle its retaliation rationally.

"Over time, I think the anger felt by America will lessen and they will begin to think rationally what they really need to do. And when that happens I think the actions they take will be much more constructive."

He said the Asean heads of government would meet in Brunei next month where they would discuss the impact of the attacks. Asean as a trade bloc, he said, would be affected.

He is also expecting Malaysia to experience economic difficulties as US consumers cut down consumption.

On Muslims and terrorism, Dr Mahathir said the victims could not distinguish between terrorists and ordinary Muslims.

He noted that there had been Hindu, Jewish, Christian and Japanese terrorists acts in the past.

"It is unfortunate, but the fact remains that in this case, the terrorists are Muslims."

The hour-long talk show touched on a range of issues including the "prosper-thy-neighbour" philosophy, Islamic militancy in Malaysia and the emergence of China as an economic and military superpower.

Dr Mahathir was also asked about his views on globalisation and his idea of taxing the rich nations to help poorer ones.

In Conversation is a 13-episode programme focusing on current issues in the region. It is a joint collaboration between four private Asean television stations and is a first in the history of Southeast Asian broadcasting.