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Move to define terrorism (HL)

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ASEAN leaders, meeting in Bandar Seri Begawan, instructed their ministers yesterday to study a Malaysian proposal for a regional seminar on terrorism as a prelude to an international conference.

The seminar, proposed by Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad during one of his three interventions in the ongoing Seventh Asean Summit, was to identify the root causes of terrorist activities and to define terrorism.

The Sultan of Brunei, Sultan Hassanal Bolkiah, who chaired the meeting, said the leaders had instructed their ministers responsible for home affairs to study the Malaysian proposal for a multilateral seminar during the Special Asean Ministerial Meeting on Transnational crime in Kuala Lumpur in April.

Dr Mahathir said he spoke on the issue during the Asean leaders' working dinner on Sunday and twice at the Asean Leaders' meeting yesterday.

"We emphasised the need to identify and define who is a terrorist and what is terrorism. This is because there are some who were terrorists before but are now regarded as respectable people," Dr Mahathir said at the end of the Asean Leaders' Summit and the Asean+3 summit yesterday.

The Southeast Asian leaders will proceed to the Asean+1 meetings respectively with Japan, South Korea and China today.

A regional seminar on terrorism, Dr Mahathir said, would be able to identify the root causes of terrorism.

He said the root causes should be identified and eliminated so that people would be less attracted to acts of terrorism.

Malaysia, he said, was already taking steps through the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (Isis) for a national-level seminar on terrorism.

Dr Mahathir made it clear that Malaysia was against terrorism, but said military strikes on Afghanistan were no solution to end frequent terrorist attacks.

Malaysia's stand was that any person who carried out an act of terrorism, irrespective of his religious belief, would be regarded as a terrorist.

"If he hijacks a plane, for example, the whole world should hunt for him and should not offer him asylum," he said.

Dr Mahathir also raised the ongoing attacks on Afghanistan by United States-led forces, during the meeting.

"We feel that it is ineffective, because it will result in a lot of civilian casualties and cause anger among Muslims around the world. It will also not help fight terrorism because terrorists are not all in Afghanistan. Even if they are, it is difficult to locate them or to kill them by dropping bombs or by carpet bombing," he said.

Dr Mahathir said while women and children have become casualties due to the bombings in Afghanistan, there was no proof that the Taliban forces were killed.

Responding to a question, he said Malaysia's proposal to call for an immediate halt to the Afghan attacks was not reflected in the 2001 Asean Declaration on Joint Action to Counter Terrorism because there were differences in opinions by other Asean nations.

Asean subscribes to consensus building in its decision-making process, which automatically bestows every member with the power of veto.

Earlier, Sultan Hassanal said the leaders condemned the terrorist attacks and expressed their concern for the welfare of innocent people as a result of the military action on Afghanistan.