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PM: US targets Muslims with visa restrictions

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BANGI, Sun. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today expressed regret that the United States has once again targeted Muslims in its fight against terrorism by imposing visa restrictions on Muslim men.

"Now it looks like the focus is on Muslims and Muslim nations. This saddens us as we know that even now there are many terrorists who are non-Muslims."

He was asked on the visa restrictions announced by US Secretary of State Colin Powell.

He said there had been clear-cut incidents in the past where terrorist acts in the US were carried out by non-Muslims.

"We know that those who were involved in the Oklahoma bombing, where many perished, were not Muslims.

(Timothy McVeigh, 33, was executed on June 11 after being convicted for the bombing of a government building in Oklahoma City. The April 1995 bombing killed 168 people.)

Immediately after the Oklahoma City bombing, both the Western media and authorities pointed their fingers at Muslim terrorists, only to be proven wrong with the arrest and subsequent conviction of McVeigh.

Speaking to the media after taking part in the PDRM/TNB International Endurance Ride 2001 horse-riding competition, Dr Mahathir expressed hope the visa restrictions were only a temporary measure.

The US State Department said yesterday the visa restrictions, to be enforced immediately, covered male Muslims from 26 predominantly Muslim countries.

Apart from Malaysia, the other countries on the list are Afghanistan, Algeria, Bahrain, Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Indonesia, Iran, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Libya, Morocco, Oman, Pakistan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Tunisia, Turkey, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

Under the new policy, described as a preventive and temporary measure by the State Department, male Muslims from Malaysia aged between 16 and 45 will have to wait for 20 days for their visa application to be processed.

It was reported that a special team comprising the FBI and CIA will scrutinise all visa applications from the listed countries before approval is granted by the embassies.

The regulation would also require Muslim men to complete a detailed questionnaire on employment, military service and weapons training.

Meanwhile, Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said today the United States' move amounted to discrimination.

The regulation put paid to the claim that the US anti-terror campaign was not in fact a campaign against Islam, he said.

"This regulation represents discrimination in all its aspects," Bernama quoted him as saying at the Changi airport in Singapore before returning to Malaysia after a one-day visit to the republic.

He considered the US assumption that Muslim males between the ages of 16 and 45 from the Muslim countries could be terrorists as "wild and arbitrary".

"The possibility of they being terrorists is a random assumption ... a wild one," he said.

"This will certainly not be accepted by the countries that had been listed."

Abdullah said the regulation should provide for exemptions as many

diplomats, young businessmen and students in that age group would want to go to the United States.

Abdullah said Malaysia realised that a country had the right to impose whatever visa restrictions or additional regulations on anyone applying for a visa to visit that country.

"It is indeed their right, but in this matter ...even though it is their right ...it is important that the regulation be not too widely applied.

"It will be good if they give exemptions to certain people even though they may be in that particular age group," he said.

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