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Stop air strikes, PM tells US (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today urged the United States to stop air strikes against Afghanistan as the military offensive would not help in the fight against terrorism.

Reiterating Malaysia's opposition to the attacks which began six days ago, the Prime Minister said the attacks should stop as innocent Afghans and not terrorists had ended up victims.

"They should, of course. We are against such an attack because I don't think it is going to help in combating terrorism," Dr Mahathir said when asked if the US should halt the air strikes immediately.

Speaking at a Press conference after officiating the 2nd Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) Tourism Ministers' meeting here, he said bombings were not the solution to terrorism.

"It should be pointed out that the alleged terrorists were not even Afghans," he said.

The attacks are targeted at the ruling Taliban which is said to be harbouring Saudi dissident Osama bin Laden, the prime suspect in the Sept 11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington.

On Pas' call for a holy war against the Americans and British, he said the party was merely trying to gain political mileage from the move.

He said Malaysians would not respond to the so-called jihad alongside the Taliban as there was nothing much that they could contribute in the present situation.

"Well, they have a right to call for jihad but I don't think anybody is going to respond to that," he said when asked to comment on Pas' call to its members to join the war in Afghanistan.

Asked if Pas has proven allegations that it was indeed an extremist party by urging its members to go for jihad, Dr Mahathir said: "Yes, Pas is trying to win votes by appearing to be very fanatical about defending Islam.

"But Pas has actually damaged Islam by splitting the Muslims in this country, ... they have distanced us, that's all that they have done."

He said that to date the so-called Islamic party had done nothing for Islam but had actually contributed to weakening Muslims here besides tarnishing the image of Islam internationally.

Dr Mahathir said the Government would not stop Pas members from travelling to Afghanistan.

"Well if they think they want to go they can go, the Government is not stopping them but we're not backing them, ... I think they will be wasting their time," Dr Mahathir said.

Earlier in his speech, Dr Mahathir urged Muslims worldwide not to resort to terrorism as such action would only bring about further misfortune to them.

"We should all try to develop our countries and equip ourselves with all the knowledge, skills and capacity to enable us to protect ourselves independently of others.

"It may take us a long time, a century even to do this, but we as Muslims must be patient. We were great before, there is no reason why we cannot become great once again," he said, urging Muslims to enhance knowledge as a means of defending themselves.

Dr Mahathir also voiced his concern over the current backlash

experienced by Muslims worldwide after the terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. He said recent incidents where Muslims, particularly air travellers, were subject to intense questioning and search, would only make matters worse.

He warned that it would only make Muslims resentful and, probably, sympathetic towards Muslims who chose terror to get back on an unfriendly world.

The Prime Minister also spoke of the need for the United Nations to immediately convene an international conference against terrorism to clearly define terrorism and probable long-term action against the scourge.

Dr Mahathir said the Government will be writing to UN secretary-general Kofi Annan to call on the world body to organise the conference.

"We want a conference on terrorism because there is a lot of confusion. Some people who are fighting for their independence are also being branded as terrorists," he said, adding that the fight against terrorism must also be clearly spelt out.

"Even in times of war, we have certain rules on how you can and cannot treat your enemy," he said, adding that a similar meeting at Asean level would be held soon.