

# Dr M criticises Arafat's exclusion at meeting

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad warned yesterday against escalating the war on terrorism to include military strikes on Iraq, saying it would only foster a terror backlash.

Dr Mahathir spoke four days before this South-East Asian nation hosts more than 50 other Muslim countries to discuss terrorism and its causes, the biggest such conference since the September 11 attacks on the US.

Dr Mahathir, a vital US ally in cracking Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, told *The Associated Press* in an exclusive interview that tackling the root causes of terror -- among them the Israeli-Palestinian conflict -- had been sidelined in the US military campaign.

But Dr Mahathir said that for peace to prevail, Iraq needed to show the world that it is not planning to attack its neighbours.

"I think we should try and use the UN agencies again," Dr Mahathir said. "Eventually Iraq will have to come around to accepting the need to satisfy the international community that they are not going to go to war against anybody and make use of weapons of mass destruction."

He noted that Israel is also armed with such fearsome weapons "and it is not fair to single out Iraq alone".

Dr Mahathir said that he did not believe the US -- which he said still risks a prolonged conflict in Afghanistan despite the downfall of the Taliban -- should "spread the war to other places".

"That would only cause a great deal more anger and that will actually become a new cause for terrorism," he said.

Dr Mahathir said it was a mistake that Yasser Arafat was prevented from attending an Arab League summit in Beirut this week to discuss a Saudi Arabian plan aimed

at settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Arafat is central to any settlement, he said.

"Not to give him the chance to speak his mind is not contributing anything to peace," Dr Mahathir said. "Undermining Arafat is one of the reasons he is not able to control the extremists among the Palestinians."

Malaysia hopes that the terrorism discussions next week by foreign ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Conference will lead, ultimately, to a broader conference by the United Nations (UN).

A key goal will be to seek a definition of what constitutes terrorism and a terrorist. Dr Mahathir noted that several respected world leaders have at times been branded terrorists by their opponents.

Malaysia has arrested 24 people in connection with an alleged plot by extremists linked to al-Qaeda to blow up the US Embassy in neighbouring Singapore. Their reported goal was to establish a hardline Islamic state across Indonesia, Malaysia and the southern Philippines.

Among them is Yazid Sufaat, a former Malaysian army captain who allowed two of the September 11 hijackers who crashed a plane into the Pentagon to use his apartment in 2000.

Yazid also is accused of aiding Zacarias Moussaoui, a French citizen in custody in the US. Moussaoui is alleged to have been the so-called 20th hijacker who missed his plane September 11.

The Justice Department is due decide tomorrow whether he should face the death penalty.

Dr Mahathir said the US has made no extradition request for anyone in Malaysian custody.

"Before we can extradite anybody we have to have full proof that he is culpable and that has to be decided in a court of law," he said. -- AP