

■ CANBERRA

Howard sticks to his guns

PRIME Minister John Howard is refusing to apologise to Asian countries for threatening pre-emptive strikes on foreign soil against terrorists who plan to attack Australians.

"You only apologise if you have something to apologise for," Howard said yesterday after howls of outrage by several neighboring countries.

Howard whipped up a diplomatic storm when he declared his

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stand earlier this week in the wake of the Oct 12 Bali bombings which killed about 190 people, half of them Australian vacationers.

He also wants the UN Charter to be changed to permit pre-emptive anti-terror action.

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Downer meets diplomats in bid to defuse situation

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Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, which are struggling to curb Islamic militancy, have criticised Howard.

"I say it is an act of arrogance that disregards the right of nations, and prejudices our friendly ties," Philippine Vice-President Teofisto Guingona said today.

In apparent reaction to Australian Foreign Minister Alexander Downer's comments that the Asian protests were "nonsense" and "absurd", Guingona said: "Our protest is not nonsense, it is the vibrant voice of reason."

But Guingona noted that "the howl of protest has been heard" and "Australia has backed down so it is not good for us to exacerbate the situation."

Most vitriolic has been Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad who said an Australian military strike on Malaysia would be an "act of war".

Dr Mahathir, who has cracked down hard on Muslim extremists in Malaysia, has threatened to break off counterterrorism co-operation with Australia unless Howard stopped behaving like "the white-man sheriff in some black country".

In **Kuala Lumpur** today, about 20 people protested peacefully at

the Australian High Commission.

They carried placards that read, "We are not Aborigines to be bullied" and "Howard: Nothing less than an apology to our Prime Minister."

Australia's opposition Labor Party has also demanded Howard apologise to Asian Governments. But Howard stood his ground today and defended his pre-emptive strike doctrine.

"It was not directed at any of our friends in the region, and the suggestion it was is wrong," he said.

Downer tried to defuse the controversy by meeting 10 senior diplomats from the region yesterday.

"We had a very constructive meeting and they're all perfectly happy," Downer said today.

He said the ambassadors had agreed "that we need to continue to work together as a united team against terrorism".

"It's going to be in the terrorists' interests if we squabble among ourselves," Downer added.

He said Howard's comments had been blown out of proportion and would eventually blow over.

He said Australia had no plans to launch unilateral military action in Asia. — AP