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Mahathir-Multifaith
MAHATHIR ON MULTIFAITH COHESION

By: Wan Ahmad Hulaimi

LONDON, Sept 22 (Bernama) -- Palestinian President Yaseer Arafat telephoned Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for help from his besieged compound in the West Bank just before he flew here en route to the ASEM (Asean-Europe) meeting in Copenhagen on Monday.

The Prime Minister said during his stopover here Saturday that he would respond to this call for help by writing to Western leaders to seek their intervention in this "most terrible situation" where Israeli troops have already laid Arafat under siege with about 100 supporters in his half-destroyed administrative building.

He was speaking to Malaysian journalists soon after addressing a Muslim-led multifaith community regeneration group, Faith Regen, at the Sulaimaniye Mosque, in one of the most deprived inner city areas in East London on the theme "Multi-Faith Cohesion".

Dr Mahathir said that Arafat called him from his besieged headquarters just as he was leaving Malaysia Friday.

"Arafat told me he was under quasi house arrest. This is a most extraordinary situation although I know they are doing this to him because of the recent bomb explosion by suicide bombers. Even without Arafat, these operations will continue as they do not take their cue from him," Dr Mahathir said.

"I fear that if Arafat is killed, he will be regarded as a martyr and as an oppressed person, and this will lead to more violence, more bombing attacks."

He repeated a call that he had made to Western powers earlier at the luncheon meeting that they should look at the roots of "terrorism" and not just talk about increased "security" measures.

"There's too much concentration on security, how to improve security and how to make it foolproof. By itself, it will not solve the terrorist problem. You must look at the causes...you can't put up barriers all the time," he said.

Dr Mahathir said that the Malaysian experience of fighting terrorism had been more effective as the problem had been tackled not only militarily but also through winning the hearts and minds of the people.

He said of the present situation: "Here's a conflict that will go on for a long time. The world will live in fear for a long time because the fight against terrorism is being done the wrong way."

Defining terrorism, he said that it should not be confined to just acts of violence as there were also currency speculators who were economic terrorists whose acts in undermining the value of currencies had caused severe unemployment, riots and death.

"This is an act as wicked as terrorism," Dr Mahathir said.

Earlier at the multifaith meeting, a Christian member of the audience spoke in support of his advocacy of the gold-backed Islamic dinar and fair trade.

"There are some Christians -- very few I'm afraid -- who share the idea that money making money is evil. We are very much encouraged by you," the questioner told him.

Dr Mahathir responded by saying that gold, having an intrinsic value, would have been harder to attack, even though its value too could have risen or fallen at various times.

To illustrate this, he produced a worthless five hundred billion dinar

issued by the Yugoslav government which was worth 12 US cents when it was printed and nothing at all today.

"What is paper currency? It is just a bluff.... If we use the gold dinar, the chances of people playing around with the currency will not be there (but) if Mr Soros (a key speculator during the recent Asian financial crisis) were to devalue the gold dinar and he wanted to sell it at half the price, then I'd be quite willing to buy it from him," he said to ripples of laughter from the audience.

Now, expanding on this theme, Dr Mahathir said that there were already one or two West Asian countries that had expressed interest in trading with Malaysia on the basis of the gold dinar.

"It is true that gold being a commodity will also be subject to speculation, but the value will not go down as badly as paper currency that is exposed to speculators," he said.

He told his mixed faith audience in his off-the-cuff address at the Mosque that Malaysia's success as a multifaith nation was based on mutual respect for each other's religion, although there were extremists trying to disrupt this harmony.

"We believe -- we Malays -- believe we are Muslim fundamentalists. People have this idea that these are extremists prone to terror or the like, but if you believe in the fundamental teachings of Islam, you become very tolerant," he said.

Before ending his busy stopover engagements here which started soon after his arrival by Malaysia Airlines flight at Heathrow in the morning, Dr Mahathir told Malaysian journalists that he did not expect very much from the ASEM meeting in Copenhagen but there were non-contentious issues that could be discussed.

-- BERNAMA

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