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Australia not a safe place, particularly for Muslims, says Dr M

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AUSTRALIA is not a safe place for Muslims, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said last night.

"At the moment, Australia is particularly unsafe for Muslims because they are likely to have their houses raided, et cetera," he said in reply to a question on travel advisories during a Press conference at the end of the Eighth Asean Summit.

A number of developed countries, including Australia, have issued travel advisories to their citizens not to travel to countries in the region.

"I think Australia is as unsafe as Asean countries," Dr Mahathir said.

"I see pictures of doors being broken which I don't think is essential".

This was in apparent reference to recent raids carried out by the Australian authorities on several Indonesian families in Australia.

Dr Mahathir was asked by an Australian reporter on the travel warnings issued by Australia to its citizens visiting Southeast Asia following the Bali bombing.

The Prime Minister said he could not understand why certain countries were being singled out when similar incidents had occurred in other countries, including the United States.

"The people are today exposed to danger wherever they may be," he said, stating that the attacks in the US were made from within the US.

"Actually America is a very dangerous place and you shouldn't be on high buildings in America... but if you must have a travel warning, you have a travel warning for everybody.

"Don't travel or don't fly because your plane might be used as a missile to crash into buildings. So why single out some countries... which is something I don't understand," he said.

On Monday, the Asean leaders issued a declaration on terrorism, which, among others, called on the international community to avoid indiscriminately advising their citizens to refrain from visiting or otherwise dealing with Asean countries in the absence of established evidence to substantiate rumours of possible terrorist attacks, as such measures could only help achieve the objectives of the terrorists.

On terrorism, the Prime Minister said the issue was brought up in the course of the summit's discussions.

"We took up the question of terrorism and it is obvious that we need to exchange information because terrorists do not recognise borders.

"They can be in one country or another country and they can be like tourists and they can be like businessmen and we do not know who they are," he said.

Dr Mahathir said countries which had information relevant to another country should provide the information to that country.

"So exchanges of information are very important and at the same time we must have a common attitude towards terrorists. We all abhor terrorists and we have to treat them as dangerous to all of us and not to any one particular country."

On the idea of Asean convening a summit with Australia, Dr Mahathir said the leaders felt that the matter should be studied more closely.

"So we will not make any decision nor will we comment at this moment until we have studied it," he added.

On Asean's future challenges, Dr Mahathir said the grouping was now an entity to be reckoned with by many countries, a significant improvement in

the perception of it since the 1997-98 Asian financial crisis.

The collaboration and close economic partnership with the Northeast Asian countries, South Korea, Japan and China, "will one day make this grouping a very important one to the global economy".

Dr Mahathir said there were several occasions when Asean was considered to be a useless organisation - the fallen tiger economies.

"But obviously today, far from being written off, many countries want to have special relationships with Asean. Countries in Europe, North America, Northeast Asia want to have free trade agreements with Asean countries. India and Australia are also interested," he said.

During the Eighth Asean Summit, representatives from Africa expressed the continent's desire to establish relationship with Asean. Dr Mahathir said while Asean welcomed the good offers from these countries with some wanting to establish Free Trade Area agreements with Asean, the 10-member grouping must study the offers first.

The Prime Minister was also asked on how Asean viewed China's growing economic importance.

"I think we can co-exist with and benefit from China. We have to look at the good and the evil."

He conceded that since China has opened its market and is pursuing market economy policies, Asean has to face some challenges as China is capable of producing high quality products at low prices.

"In our discussions, it was accepted that we have an exclusion list in order to take care of those sensitive products which may suffer from China's access to the Asean market and China accepts that."

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia has always been very friendly with China and it fully supported China's entry into the World Trade Organisation.

"We feel if you keep identifying people as your future enemy, you are going to have your present enemy and we do not consider China as our future enemy."

On the Declaration of Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea, Dr Mahathir said Asean was not disappointed that it was not a Code of Conduct, but simply a declaration.

"It is a good agreement that is very assuring for all countries concerned. It will help us manage the situation in the South China Sea without so much of any aggressive unilateral action on the part of the countries concerned."

Philippine President Gloria Arroyo had said that if this - The Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea - was the only agreement signed during the summit, she would have gone home a "very happy" person. It shows, the Prime Minister said, that the declaration was good.

On the Asean+3 secretariat proposed by Malaysia, which was later scaled down to an Asean+3 bureau, Dr Mahathir said he felt it was not very important to have either one.

"We have accepted the fact that the Southeast and Northeast Asian countries have very close relations and we will work closely together for our mutual benefits."

Asked whether the summit would be his last, Dr Mahathir said he was not sure.

The next summit will be in Bali on Oct 6-7 next year.

KUALA LUMPUR, Tues. - Sarawak National Party (SNAP), which once ruled Sarawak, has been deregistered following its failure to resolve its leadership crisis.

SNAP, one of the four Barisan Nasional parties in the State, can however appeal to the Home Minister against the decision of the Registrar of Societies.

Registrar Datuk Ismail Dolah Harun said the minister could endorse,

reject or alter the decision as stipulated under Section 18 of the Societies Act 1966.

(SNAP ruled Sarawak from 1963 to 1966 under Datuk Stephen Kalong Ningkan.)

Ismail said the decision to deregister the 41-year-old party was taken after the party failed to resolve the dispute involving its office-bearers.

He said that SNAP also failed to respond satisfactorily to the show-cause letter by the RoS on why it should not be deregistered.

SNAP became embroiled in a crisis in April, when its president, Datuk Amar James Wong Kim Min, expelled Bintulu Member of Parliament Datuk Seri Tiong King Sing from the party on grounds of indiscipline.

Tiong's expulsion split the party leadership, with one faction headed by Wong and the other by Environment and Public Health Minister Datuk William Mawan Ikom.

The crisis came to a head in August, when the group opposed to Wong held an extraordinary general meeting which elected Mawan as party president.

Wong regarded this as a coup attempt by the group, intending to take over the party through unconstitutional means.

SNAP has four MPs and six State Assemblymen, of whom five are in the group led by Mawan.

BN secretary-general Tan Sri Mohamed Rahmat said SNAP's deregistration was unfortunate as the party had long served the people of Sarawak.

Advising the disputing parties to resolve their differences and appeal against the Registrar's decision, Mohamed said:

"Do not allow the party to rot like this because of internal squabbles.

"I advise all parties to end their squabbles and work things out among themselves."

He also said what had befallen SNAP should be a lesson to all BN component parties.

"Do not think we can escape action from RoS just because we are in BN," he said, adding the RoS had yet to inform BN officially of SNAP's deregistration.

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