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Mahathir-Chirac

CHIRAC ASSURES MAHATHIR HE WILL HELP SOLVE PALESTINIAN PROBLEM

By: Mikhail Raj Abdullah

COPENHAGEN, Sept 23 (Bernama) -- French President Jacques Chirac has given an assurance to Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that he will use his influence and do whatever he can to find a lasting solution to the Palestinian issue.

Chirac also told Dr Mahathir that he shared the latter's deep concern over the seige of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's headquarters in the West Bank and the need for intervention to stop the current conflict.

The assurance came during a four-eyed meeting between the two leaders on the sidelines of the ongoing Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM), Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar told journalists.

Both leaders agreed during the 20-minute meeting that Israel should stop its aggression in the West Bank and that prolonged military action would only serve to create more suicide bombers, said Syed Hamid.

They agreed that "getting rid of Arafat is not going to solve the problem and that whatever decisions on the Palestinian leadership must be decided by the people themselves and not imposed on them," the minister said.

Syed Hamid said Dr Mahathir had asked Chirac and the Europeans to use their influence to urge the United States to find a long-lasting political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Otherwise, it would continue to create a lot of anger and dissatisfaction in the Arab and Muslim world, he said.

Chirac's commitment to help comes just days after Dr Mahathir wrote to him urging for Western leaders to intervene to resolve the Israeli seige of Arafat's headquarters.

Syed Hamid said the French president also shared Dr Mahathir's concern over the yet-to-be resolved issue of providing a separate homeland for the long-suffering Palestinians.

He said Dr Mahathir and Chirac agreed on the urgent need for a political solution to the Palestinian issue and that it should not be treated as a security issue.

"Killing and suppressing the Palestinians forcibly will not bring about law and order in the West Bank," the minister said in reference to Israel's high-handed and military response to suicide bombings under the guise of self-defence.

"The Israelis think they can enforce law and order before a political solution can be found," he said.

Nevertheless, Syed Hamid said that while France along with the European Union had been sympathetic towards the Palestinian cause and supported the two-state solution, it could not act alone because "it is American involvement ultimately that can bring about a separate homeland for the Palestinians."

In the absence of American intervention, the solution through a separate state for the Palestinians would remain a dream, he said.

U.S. President George Bush seems to be too busy with local elections to give full attention to a two-state solution, he said.

Syed Hamid also said that Israel was taking advantage of Washington's pre-occupation with Iraq to further suppress the Palestinians and Arafat.

He said Chirac and Dr Mahathir also welcomed Iraq's decision to allow United Nations weapons inspectors into the country unconditionally to ascertain whether there were weapons of mass destruction as claimed by

Washington.

Here, Syed Hamid said, Chirac strongly supported a multilateral solution through the auspices of the United Nations and that the United States should refrain from unilateral action.

"There is no short-cut and unilateral action is not acceptable in resolving the issue and creating a better world order, otherwise it would only further anger Arabs and Muslims," he said.

"War is not going to solve the conflict but will destabilise the area. That (war) would be a 'natural recruit' for would-be terrorists."

Syed Hamid said the fight against terrorism would be marred or tainted by the feeling of injustice and selectivity and of not giving a fair-handed treatment of the Muslim issues and all the issues in West Asia.

"Generally, Dr Mahathir and Chirac have the same opinion about the need to settle the conflict through the United Nations," the minister said.

The leaders agreed that Israel need to be made to comply with UN resolutions and stop its occupation and revert to finding a political solution with the Palestinians.

Asked on the outcome of the ASEM dialogue on terrorism this morning, Syed Hamid said it was Dr Mahathir who insisted that the wording of the ASEM Copenhagen Declaration against International Terrorism issued today included "duly taking into the account the root causes of terrorism."

On reports that Asian leaders were keen to use the euro as an alternative to the US dollar in international trading, the foreign minister said it was again Dr Mahathir who raised the matter and the need to study the implications of using the European single currency in efforts to reduce the vulnerability of developing economies which depended solely on the greenback.

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