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Dr M blasts Howard (HL)

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PUTRAJAYA, Mon. - Malaysia will consider it "an act of aggression" if Australia or any other nation intrudes into this country to fight purported terrorism, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said tonight.

"I would like to remind everyone concerned that this is a sovereign and independent nation and no one can try to implement his laws within our borders.

"If anyone tries to carry out his laws within our borders, then we will consider that an act aggression and we will take action under our laws," Dr Mahathir told reporters at a breaking of fast at Seri Perdana.

Dr Mahathir had been asked to comment on a statement by Australian Prime Minister John Howard that Australia wanted to take action against terrorists in neighbouring countries if they planned attacks on his country.

Howard said the United Nations Charter should be amended to allow pre-emptive strikes against terrorists in other countries.

In a strong response, Dr Mahathir said Howard's remarks were not only disappointing but also arrogant.

"There are many countries in East Asia, all of which are Asian countries. This country (Australia) stands out like a sore thumb trying to impose its European values on Asia.

"It is as if this is still the good old days when people can shoot Aborigines without caring about human rights, etc.

"These are the people who talk about human rights. Actually, for them anything goes, including assassination. And what they are saying is that they have the right to assassinate people in other countries.

"We are against this because we are a free nation. We will not allow any foreign country to impose or enforce its laws within our territory."

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would consider it an act of aggression if anyone fired a rocket or used unmanned aircraft to assassinate anyone in Malaysia.

"We will consider that a crime and will take action against the nation which carries out such acts."

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia would never allow any country to impose or enforce its laws here. This, he said, was not the right way of countering terrorism and to fight terrorists.

"If anybody has any information about activities in Malaysia which may affect or cause harm to other countries, then it is the duty of those people to inform us.

"We will take action according to our laws, provided, of course, there is basis for such accusations."

In Canberra, Howard faced a storm of protest from political opponents, and drew condemnation by Southeast Asian nations which warned against the use of military action in another country.

Senator Andrew Bartlett, who leads the Australian Democrats Party, said: "Howard's short-term populism, I think, is putting Australians more at risk."

The opposition Labor Party's foreign affairs spokesman, Kevin Rudd, said Howard was trying to find legal justification to support a possible United States attack on Iraq.

"But I really question the wisdom of the Prime Minister using this

language, in terms of how it is read in terms of our neighbours and friends in the region," Rudd said.

He added that Howard was using language designed to make him look "hairy-chested" to his domestic audience. "As it is being read, it is seen as Australia under John Howard is contemplating a possibility of an attack on our neighbours in Southeast Asia," he said.

"The Prime Minister only ever wants to talk war," Labor leader Simon Crean said.

Green Senator Bob Brown urged a retraction, saying: "This is a major gaffe by a Prime Minister caught out by jingoism."

Howard is one of Washington's staunchest supporters and was quick to contribute troops, ships and planes to the US-led coalition in Afghanistan. He said last month he was drafting military contingency plans for a possible war in Iraq.

The Philippines dismissed as "arrogant" and "bizarre" Howard's suggestions, with its National Security Adviser Roilo Golez saying he would recommend Manila re-evaluate a proposed anti-terrorism agreement.

"You know this (Howard's statement) to me is quite arrogant and because of this, I have recommended that we review and go slow on the proposed anti-terror pact with Australia because they might use this for their pre-emptive strike agenda.

"I can't believe it comes from a supposedly friendly country in the neighbourhood. You are talking about a region with very strong government, the Asean region. This is the 21st century, not the 19th century," he said.

Foreign Secretary Blas Ople said yesterday that a bilateral ministerial meeting had been scheduled for January to discuss the anti-terror proposal, which would boost intelligence sharing.

Presidential spokesman Rigoberto Tiglao said Manila would also seek clarification of Howard's statement, which came after Australia and Canada closed their embassies in Manila last week in response to "specific" terrorist threats.

"I'm afraid we cannot agree to that proposal. It violates sovereignty. If it would involve us, then we would protest that very strongly.

"Any movement of any combat troops in a sovereign country will have to be done with the agreement of that country. That's a basic principle of the United Nations," he said, adding Manila remains "very disappointed" about the embassy closures.

A spokesman for Indonesia's Foreign Ministry said Australia did not have the right to launch military strikes in other countries and warned that countries could not "flout international law and norms willy-nilly".

The Thai Government said no country should do anything like Howard suggested. Each country had its own sovereignty that must be protected, a government spokesman told the radio.

Yesterday, Defence Minister Datuk Seri Najib Razak said Malaysia strongly opposed any move by Australia or other foreign powers to conduct military action on its soil.

He said Malaysia's defences are good enough to contain any terror threat. "We are a sovereign country and there is no way we will allow them to violate that."