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France backs Malaysian stand (HL)

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FRANCE and Malaysia believe that unless political resolutions are made concerning the tensions in West Asia, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the looming war in Iraq, efforts to combat terrorism will be an exercise in futility.

The common stand was expressed by leaders of both countries following a short meeting today on the sidelines of the Fourth AsiaEurope Meeting here.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his French counterpart Jacques Chirac expressed concern over the situation in the Israeli-occupied West Bank where Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat is under siege.

Chirac shared Dr Mahathir's concerns on the need for intervention to stop the current conflict and the siege at Arafat's headquarters, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said.

Syed Hamid, who attended the meeting, also said that both leaders agreed on the need for a multilateral approach to the Iraq issue.

They also concurred that any effort to ensure security, for example in the fight against terrorism, must be accompanied by political resolutions.

Military might alone could worsen the situation, fuelling anger and resentment among Arabs and Muslims in general, which could encourage more acts of terrorism.

Syed Hamid said Chirac had agreed with Dr Mahathir's request that France use its good relations with the United States to persuade Washington to curb Israel's aggression in the occupied territories and help find a long-term solution to the conflict.

"No one can stop (Israeli leader Ariel) Sharon but the United States," Syed Hamid said.

France is one of the US' longest-standing allies and is also a permanent member of the United Nations Security Council.

US involvement will ultimately be required for the creation of a Palestinian state.

While Washington agreed in principle to a Palestinian state alongside Israel, it was moving too slowly, seemingly too pre-occupied with domestic matters and its current dogged determination to invade Iraq.

Meanwhile, Sharon was taking advantage of the situation to do more damage to the Palestinians, including threatening the life of its leader.

Both leaders agreed that getting rid of Arafat was not going to solve the Palestinian problem, Syed Hamid said.

On the question of weapons of mass destruction Iraq was alleged to have, Syed Hamid said both Malaysia and France agreed that the UN secretary-general must also be given the opportunity to handle the issue.

"There should be no shortcuts, and there should be no unilateral action," said Syed Hamid. "President Chirac feels very strongly that the multilateral process must be given a chance."

Political resolutions must be sought on the two issues before any meaningful fight on terrorism could be carried out. The US had alleged Iraq was not only producing weapons of mass destruction but also sponsoring terrorism.

Later, Dr Mahathir also met Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and European Commission president Romano Prodi.

In addition to the bilaterals, Dr Mahathir participated in several meetings with 22 of the 25 European Union and Asian country leaders who

attended Asem 4.