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PM doubtful US will hold back attacks

Ashraf Abdullah

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said he was not optimistic that the United States would refrain from unilateral military action against Baghdad although UN weapon inspectors were back in Iraq.

"But I think things are better today, definitely. We hope that the US will go back to the UN if anything should happen requiring decisions," he told Malaysian journalists after a bilateral meeting with French President Jacques Chirac.

Dr Mahathir said Chirac was, however, optimistic that the US would not launch a military attack on Iraq without consulting the United Nations Security Council.

"He hopes that this can work out."

Chirac had said earlier that he would not support unilateral US military action against Iraq, and any decision must be made through the UN.

He had urged Iraq to comply with the UN Resolution to allow UN weapon inspectors to establish whether it had stockpiled weapons of mass destruction.

Chirac, at the Nato summit in Prague last week, had expressed his view that "there cannot be an exclusively military response to terrorism".

Dr Mahathir's meeting with Chirac, which was scheduled for 30 minutes, took more than an hour. Although Dr Mahathir was scheduled to break fast at his hotel, Chirac hosted an impromptu breaking of fast ceremony for the Prime Minister and his entourage at the Elysee Palace.

"I had a long discussion with the President, covering all issues, including Palestine, Iraq, globalisation and bilateral relations. That's why it took longer than expected," Dr Mahathir said.

He said Chirac was also happy with the outcome of the oneday Pledging Conference on the Reconstruction of Lebanon (Paris II) on Saturday.

France had invited countries and financial institutions friendly to Lebanon to attend the conference to examine possible forms of support they could offer to the Lebanese Government's economic reform programme.

The meeting was attended by 18 countries. Besides Malaysia and France, other countries were Saudi Arabia, Germany, Italy, Canada, Bahrain, Qatar, Belgium, Denmark, Spain, the United States, Britain, Japan, Kuwait, Oman and the United Arab Emirates.

Countries participating in the conference made pledges to provide Lebanon US\$5 billion (RM19 billion) in soft loans for economic reforms in the war-torn nation.

Malaysia has agreed to provide Lebanon a US\$300 million concessionary loan, making it the biggest loan contributor after Saudi Arabia and France.

Also known as the Conference on Support for the Programme for Economic Reforms in Lebanon, it is a follow-up to the Paris I conference last year initiated by France and attended by friendly countries, including Malaysia, to boost reforms in Lebanon.

Dr Mahathir and wife Datuk Seri Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali later left for London for a two-day private visit.