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Mahathir-Satisfied

MAHATHIR SATISFIED WITH OUTCOME OF ASEM SUMMIT

By: Mikhail Raj Abdullah

COPENHAGEN, Sept 24 (Bernama) -- Despite earlier scepticism, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has expressed satisfaction with the outcome of the fourth informal summit between Asian and European leaders, but says follow-up action is needed to operationalise the many working proposals in efforts to build further bridges between the two continents.

Although the fourth Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM 4) might not be able to do much in issues such as those related to Iraq, the frank and open discussions between leaders from both continents were useful indeed, he told a press conference at the end of the two-day ASEM summit today.

ASEM is an informal process between 10 Asian countries and 15 European nations and the European Commission aimed at bringing the continents closer together in the political, socio-economic and cultural aspects.

Among the achievements at ASEM 4 was the pledge made by leaders contained in the Copenhagen Declaration on Cooperation Against International Terrorism whereby the comprehensive approach to combat the menace included finding its root causes.

Dr Mahathir, who ASEM officials said insisted for such a wording to be included in the statement, said that unless you knew the root causes of terrorism, you would not be able to deal with it by merely using security or military approaches.

For as long as there was a cause or some people believed there was a cause for them to act in that manner, they would continue to act even if some of them were killed or they killed themselves as there would be other volunteers, he said in reference to the Sept 11 terrorist attacks on the United States and suicide bombers in Palestine.

Asked to comment by a foreign journalist on the proposed NATO Rapid Response Force for which a meeting of the defence ministers of NATO countries was being held in Warsaw, he said Malaysia was against the setting up of such a force.

NATO has proposed the creation of a strike force of up to 20,000 troops to conduct military operations anywhere in the world with a core of 5,000 that could be deployed in seven to 30 days.

"I certainly do not like the idea of pre-emptive strikes in order to prevent possible acts of terror, but the crucial question is, who is going to make the decision to strike? If it is going to be any country, then many countries are going to make pre-emptive strikes against their neighbours and that will cause a lot of instability in the whole world," said Dr Mahathir.

So, the concept of pre-emptive strikes was something that had to be debated internationally before anyone should take it up, he said.

Turning to Britain's release of a dossier setting out London's case for action against Iraq with claims that President Saddam Hussein was building up stocks of chemical and biological weapons and was ready to use them, he said:

"We will be very happy to support military action if it can be proven without reasonable doubt that Iraq was manufacturing weapons of mass destruction," Dr Mahathir said.

He also said Malaysia did not agree with United Nations sanctions against Baghdad for they did not hurt the government but hurt the people, poor people, women and children.

"Why should we punish these people who are not responsible at all for

the government they have?" he said.

Asked to what extent the United States and Britain had made up their mind to attack Iraq, he said: "The US and Britain should listen to the rest of the world and if the rest of the world cannot agree, there must be a reason for it; so let's act multilaterally as the unilateral action by these two countries affects the rest of the world."

To suggestions that some members of the European Union were guilty of practising double standards as they were bent on supporting efforts to attack Iraq but ignored Israel's defiance of numerous UN resolutions such as on providing a separate homeland for the Palestinians, he said:

"This is something that everybody has been accused of...people say one thing when it suits them and another when it does not.

Actually, if it is a friendly country, it is all right not to be democratic, but if you are not a friendly country, you must become democratic and things like that, we are used to that," he said.

"That is part of international relations that you find today. You don't have to be very correct, you can be a little bit hypocritical (but) I am not saying that Europe is hypocritical, I am saying everybody is," Dr Mahathir said.

Asked on the siege at Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat's headquarters compound at the West Bank, he said Israel should not pin him down in that way.

"My worry is that if anything should happen to Arafat, he would become a martyr and if that happens, it would cause a great deal of anger among the Muslim community throughout the world and not just in Palestine."

He said that if this happened, there would probably be more recruits for terrorist activities and that was why it was important that there should be no accident which might cause injury or death to Arafat.

"If you remove President Arafat, who is there to replace him? If you replace him with someone who complies with the wishes of Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, he would be rejected or even assassinated," said Dr Mahathir.

"The best thing is to deal with Arafat as he is the only credible leader of the Palestinians. Obviously, he is not able to completely control the acts by certain groups, but neither will anybody else," he said.

Dr Mahathir is expected to meet the Malaysian community later today, after which he will leave Copenhagen for a brief holiday in Europe before returning to Malaysia next week.

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