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Palestinian issue likely to be high on Asem agenda

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THE worsening situation in Israeli-occupied Palestinian may push the West Asian problem high on the agenda at the Fourth Asia-Europe Meeting beginning here today.

Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat had made a telephone call to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to ask for his help to bring up the matter at the meeting, which will be attended by leaders from 25 Asian and European countries, a request he most likely would honour.

Dr Mahathir has written letters to several Western leaders on the matter.

It is understood that Dr Mahathir would also have raised issues such as the United States' determination to wage war against Iraq, even without Arafat's call.

Arafat is a virtual prisoner in his office in the occupied West Bank as Israeli forces demolish buildings in his compound and dig trenches to isolate him from his supporters. The latest action by Tel Aviv stemmed from two new suicide bombings in Israel.

Before the recent events in Palestine, many observers had expected the political part of the summit to be dominated by the Iraq issue.

Dr Mahathir, who arrived here for the meeting, said in London yesterday that the war on terrorism was warped.

Too much resources were being employed to prevent terrorism and yet little was done to understand and identify the reasons why it flourished. As a result, the issue of terrorism might never be settled.

He had his first opportunity to raise the Palestinian issue at a lunch meeting among Asian leaders soon after he arrived, and in the evening at an informal working dinner hosted by Danish Prime Minister Anders Fogh Rasmussen.

Unlike most summits, the biennial Asem is an informal gathering where no real agenda is set for discussions.

While officials may prepare an indicative list of topics that are assumed to be of common interest, leaders are free to raise any issue they want.

While statements from Asem are non-binding in nature, they carry the political weight of 25 countries that constitute a third of the world population.

Asem groups Austria, Belgium, Brunei, China, Denmark, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Indonesia, Ireland, Italy, Japan, South Korea, Luxembourg, Malaysia, the Netherlands, the Philippines, Portugal, Singapore, Spain, Sweden, Thailand, the United Kingdom and Vietnam.

Much of the political discussions at Asem 4 are expected to be on international terrorism, especially the realities of post-Sept 11.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, who met the Malaysian media here upon his arrival on Saturday, said Asem 4 must send a strong signal to the international community that while terrorism was abhorred, it was just as important to find its root causes.

"We must ascertain why people turn to terrorist activities so that we can provide an accurate diagnosis to combat terrorism effectively."

He said the threat of terrorism cut across borders as well as ethnic, cultural and religious lines.

He added that the leaders needed to spell out co-operative efforts to deal with the problem successfully.

Other topics to be discussed include the thaw in relations between South and North Korea, Asean's co-operation with China, Japan and South Korea or Asean + 3, and the enlargement of the European Union membership.