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Rethink on anti-terror pact (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Wed. - Malaysia may review its anti-terrorism pact with Canberra if the Australian Government, particularly Prime Minister John Howard, continues to demonstrate insensitivity, arrogance and personal prejudice against other nations, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

Dr Mahathir, however, made it clear that Malaysia held nothing against the Australian people.

"Not all Australians support this arrogant attitude of Howard. Howard obviously has been very arrogant. As you know we've never had a good relationship with him, but we have good relations with Australians as a people.

"They are here, we do business with them, we send our students to study there, they have good schools, good teachers. But unfortunately they have a leader who is totally insensitive and thinks that he is the white-man sheriff in some black country."

The Prime Minister said Australia stood to "lose out" if Howard maintained his "white-supremacy" attitude.

"Certainly the Australian Government's attitude is not welcome and in the end they will lose out. We are co-operating as much as we can today in the fight against terrorism ...but if they are going to blame us, we will have to rethink co-operating with them."

Malaysia and Australia signed a memorandum of understanding on co-operation to combat international terrorism on Aug 2 in Putrajaya.

The pact was signed a few days after visiting United States Secretary of State Colin Powell proposed that Malaysia should be the regional centre for counter-terrorism.

Both Malaysia and Australia had then expressed confidence that the pact would further consolidate their long-standing ties.

At a Press conference after visiting the recently separated conjoined twins Azama and Azami Kamarul Zaman at the Kuala Lumpur Hospital's paediatric ward, Dr Mahathir said Howard's sudden support of "pre-emptive actions" smacked of hypocrisy.

"When we introduced the Internal Security Act, which is a kind of pre-emptive action, they said that it was wrong in law, but what they are trying to do may amount to assassination in our land, and this is even worse than the ISA.

"They are very good at criticising people but when they do something, it is right, the world must change its law in order to allow them to commit what is to us a crime...assassinations," he said.

Asked if Asean should make a clear stand on Howard's statements, Dr Mahathir said he wasn't sure if Asean members shared a similar sentiment.

"Maybe there are some Asean countries that might welcome (Howard's policy); not all have made their stand.

"The Philippines is obviously critical; so is Indonesia. I don't know about Thailand and others who have not responded, so we can't say that it is an Asean stand at the moment.

"I don't know if Asean (members) think alike or not, but sometimes there are some Asean countries which have other ideas."

Dr Mahathir added that as far as Malaysia was concerned any attempt to intrude into its sovereign territory would draw the appropriate response.

He said terrorists had succeeded beyond their own expectations, as

developed countries seemed now to be totally destabilised.

"They have not only been able to destroy the two buildings in New York and Washington but have managed to frighten the whole world.

"People are now afraid to fly and (terrorists) have totally destabilised developed countries to a point that they (developed countries) cannot think straight any more.

"They do things which only aggravate matters; not actually in the interest of fighting against terrorists."

Dr Mahathir expressed confidence that the Non-Aligned Movement, which meets in Kuala Lumpur in February, would take a stand on the matter.

"I suppose NAM will put up some kind of a stand on this. Malaysia does not aspire to be a go-between for this confrontation between the rich and poor, between the mighty and the weak, but whatever we can do, we will do."

As Dr Mahathir slammed Howard, the Australian Prime Minister was accused of sidelining Australia in Asia by angering regional neighbours.

The Philippines, Indonesia and Thailand joined Malaysia in lashing out at the comments, saying such action would amount to an act of war, although Howard did not specifically mention military action and insists his comments were not directed at the region.

Reuters quoted political commentators as saying that the diplomatic spat again showed that foreign policy was the major weakness of the conservative leader who has won strong public support at home for putting domestic interests first and for his national security policies.

Meanwhile, the Australian Government called together senior diplomats from Southeast Asian nations for a meeting in Canberra aimed at allaying fears that it was planning pre-emptive anti-terror attacks in the region.

Foreign Minister Alexander Downer said he used the damage-control meeting to explain the comments.