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`Discuss Howard's statement'

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PUTRAJAYA, Sat. - Asean countries have to discuss among themselves Australian Prime Minister John Howard's statement that Australia was prepared to take pre-emptive action against terrorists in neighbouring countries.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said Howard's statement had tarnished the image of countries in the region and jeopardised their economy, security and sovereignty.

"His refusal to apologise reflects his arrogance. We have to act collectively against terrorism, and it does not give powers to one country to enter another country, and do what it likes," he said at Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Hari Raya open house for dignitaries today.

He said Howard's refusal to retract the statement has forced Malaysia to review its bilateral ties with Australia, adding that "recalcitrant" was the apt word to describe Howard.

On the two Malaysian students who were advised by their Australian institutions not to return home for Hari Raya because "the situation in Malaysia was tense", Syed Hamid said he would have to get more information.

If it was true, he would send an official note of protest to Australia.

Yesterday, the two students, who attended Dr Mahathir's open house, had informed the Prime Minister that they were advised against returning home.

Meanwhile, International Trade and Industry Minister Datuk Seri Rafidah Aziz said Howard and his Government should not be playing a "macho political" game.

Howard should not "dance to the gallery" because the world needed to join forces to combat terrorism.

"Statements such as Howard's would affect efforts taken by countries in the region to combat terrorism."

Rafidah, however, said this would not affect bilateral trade with Australia as it did not involve the ordinary people.

"The business circle has no problems. This is a problem between leaders. Maybe due to political pressure, Howard made a statement which is insensitive to its neighbours.

"He has not realised that Malaysia had taken action against terrorists even before the Sept 11 incident. They are only talking about it after the Sept 11 attack."

She said Australia has to put things right in its own backyard.