

29/03/2002

Don't escalate war by attacking Iraq, says PM

PUTRAJAYA, Thurs. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad warned today against escalating the war on terrorism to include military strikes on Iraq, saying it would only foster a terror backlash.

Dr Mahathir spoke four days before Malaysia hosts more than 50 other Muslim countries to discuss terrorism and its causes, the biggest such conference since the Sept 11 attacks on the United States.

Dr Mahathir, a vital US ally in cracking Osama bin Laden's al-Qaeda network, told The Associated Press in an exclusive interview that tackling the root causes of terror - among them the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - had been sidelined in the US military campaign.

But he said that for peace to prevail, Iraq needed to show the world that it is not planning to attack its neighbours.

"I think we should try and use the UN agencies again," he said. "Eventually Iraq will have to come around to accepting the need to satisfy the international community that they are not going to go to war against anybody and make use of weapons of mass destruction."

Dr Mahathir noted that Israel is also armed with such fearsome weapons "and it is not fair to single out Iraq alone".

Washington is increasingly viewed as laying the groundwork to strike Iraq unless leader Saddam Hussein allows UN inspectors to verify that he is not developing chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.

Dr Mahathir said that he did not believe the United States - which he said still risks a prolonged conflict in Afghanistan despite the downfall of the Taliban - should "spread the war to other places".

"That would only cause a great deal more anger and that will actually become a new cause for terrorism," he said.

Dr Mahathir said it was a mistake that (Palestinian President) Yasser Arafat was prevented from attending an Arab League summit in Beirut this week to discuss a Saudi Arabian plan aimed at settling the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Arafat is central to any settlement, he said.

"Not to give him the chance to speak his mind is not contributing anything to peace," Dr Mahathir said. "Undermining Arafat is one of the reasons he is not able to control the extremists among the Palestinians."

The bloodshed increased yesterday when a suicide bomber burst into a hotel in the Israeli town of Netanya during a meal for the Jewish holiday of Passover. At least 19 Israelis were killed and more than 120 wounded.

Malaysia hopes that the terrorism discussions next week by Foreign Ministers of the Organisation of Islamic Conference will lead, ultimately, to a broader conference by the UN.

A key goal will be to seek a definition of what constitutes terrorism and a terrorist. Dr Mahathir noted that several respected world leaders had at times been branded terrorists by their opponents.

Malaysia has arrested 24 people in connection with an alleged plot by extremists linked to al-Qaeda to blow up the US Embassy in Singapore. Their reported goal was to establish an Islamic state across Indonesia, Malaysia and the southern Philippines.

Among them is Yazid Sufaat, a former Malaysian army captain who allowed two of the Sept 11 hijackers who crashed a plane into the Pentagon to use his apartment in 2000.

Yazid is also accused of aiding Zacarias Moussaoui, a French citizen in custody in the US. Moussaoui is alleged to have been the so-called 20th

hijacker who missed his plane on Sept 11.

The US Justice Department is due to decide tomorrow whether he should face the death penalty.

France has protested against the possibility of capital punishment and several European countries are reticent about extraditing suspects if they could face execution.

Dr Mahathir said that Malaysia - which punishes some crimes by hanging - would not protest extradition on such grounds. But the US has made no request for anyone in Malaysian custody, he said.

"Before we can extradite anybody we have to have full proof that he is culpable and that has to be decided in a court of law," Dr Mahathir said.

Since Sept 11, Washington's perception of Malaysia as a bastion against terrorism has led to improved relations.

Malaysian and US officials say that arrangements are being discussed for Dr Mahathir to visit Washington, possibly in May.

Dr Mahathir said it would be up to President Bush to decide if there was time for them to meet. "I think it is likely if I go to the United States, I would meet him," he said.

Meanwhile, Chok Suat Ling and Azura Abas report from Shah Alam that Dr Mahathir has expressed regret that efforts are being made to undermine Arafat by not allowing him to leave Palestinian territories.

"We regret efforts to undermine Arafat. By doing so, he will not be able to control his people who will go around blasting themselves inside Israeli supermarkets.

"By undermining him, he cannot control his people. How do you expect him to control when you don't even recognise or respect his authority?" he said when responding to questions by reporters after launching the Favelle Favco Cranes (M) Sdn Bhd and a Malaysian-made crane called the Bangau.

Dr Mahathir also criticised steps taken to prevent Arafat from going abroad. "It has never happened to any government head."

(END)