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US-UK stand a threat to world peace

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THE United States' and Britain's dismissal of international opinion in their determination to attack Iraq may set a bad precedent in international relations, possibly threatening world peace.

Other countries could then decide to follow the allies' example and launch military actions against others for whatever reason, said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad.

"Many countries are going to make pre-emptive strikes against their neighbours, and that will cause a lot of instability in the whole world. The concept of pre-emptive strikes is something that has to be debated internationally before anyone takes it up," he said at the end of the Fourth Asia-Europe Meeting here.

Both the United States and Britain are now waging a public relations campaign to garner support for their plans to invade Iraq and force a change in government.

Both countries are preparing their forces for the military campaign over allegations that Baghdad was manufacturing weapons of mass destruction and sponsoring international terrorism.

The United States, through the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (Nato), had also called for the setting up of a rapid action force for pre-emptive strikes against terrorists or states sponsoring terrorists.

"I certainly do not like the idea of pre-emptive strikes to prevent possible acts of terror because if there is going to be a pre-emptive strike, who is going to make the decision?"

Dr Mahathir, who attended Asem 4 with 21 other Asian and European leaders, said both the United States and Britain must listen to the rest of the world before embarking on the potentially disastrous action.

"If the rest of the world cannot agree, there must be a reason for it. They don't disagree because they want to be difficult. Let us act multilaterally."

If both countries have proof of Iraq dabbling with weapons of mass destruction or terrorism, then they should be verified.

For example, on the weapons of mass destruction, let the United Nations inspectors do their jobs, he said.

"We will support military action if it can be proven without any reasonable doubt that (the Iraqis) are manufacturing weapons of mass destruction."

Dr Mahathir also regretted the hypocritical stance of some countries in their condemnation of Iraq for not obeying United Nations Security Council resolutions.

The decision to take military action against Iraq largely stems from an alleged breach of a Security Council resolution 12 years ago against the manufacture of weapons of mass destruction.

Yet, the United States and Britain continued to look the other way on Israel, despite it not complying with some 30 United Nations resolutions, including withdrawal from occupied territories in Palestine.

"People say one thing when it suits them and something else when it doesn't suit them... that is part of the international relations that you find today.

"You don't have to be very correct. You can be a little bit hypocritical."

On the 12-year-old economic sanctions against Iraq, Dr Mahathir said it

was unfair to the Iraqi people. If the target was the Government, then the people should not be the ones suffering.

"It hurts the people, poor people, pregnant mothers, old people, children ... why should we punish these people who are not responsible at all for the Government they have?

"It is not a democratic country. They did not choose the Government and (the sanctions) are punishing them because they have a bad Government, or at least in your view it is bad. If you have to act, act against the people responsible."

On the fate of Yasser Arafat, currently under siege by Israeli forces in Ramallah, Dr Mahathir hoped nothing would happen to the Palestinian leader that could anger the global Muslim community.

"My worry is that if anything happens to Arafat, he would become a martyr ... a syahid.

"If that happens it would cause a great deal of anger among the Muslim community throughout the world, not just Palestinians, and then there will probably be more recruits for terrorist activities."

Dr Mahathir said the world had to live with Arafat being the current leader of the Palestinians and there should be no attempt to replace or undermine him.

"If you replace him with someone who complies with the wishes of (Israeli Prime Minister Ariel) Sharon, he will be rejected or even assassinated.

"Obviously (Arafat) is not able to completely control the acts by certain groups, but neither will anybody else. If you undermine his credibility, his effectiveness will also be undermined.

"This is what they are doing, and this is not helping to solve the Palestinian situation."