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PM: UN weapons inspectors must act professionally

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PUTRAJAYA, Thurs. - United Nations weapons inspectors despatched to Iraq must carry out their duties professionally and not be a tool of any party or stray into issues irrelevant to their task, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today.

The Prime Minister, expressing relief that Iraq has finally agreed to allow weapons inspectors to check on probable weapons of mass destruction, said the inspectors should not repeat the scenario that took place during the last inspection stint in Iraq.

"I'm glad that Iraq has agreed to let in the weapons inspectors. We agree that Iraq should allow the inspectors to check if they have weapons of mass destruction or not but I hope the inspectors will do a good job.

"Previous inspectors who were there had complained that they were not able to carry out their work because they were under pressure to provide information which was not relevant to their task.

"Reports that were made to the UN were condemned by some of the inspectors because they claimed that the reports were not accurate. This time around I hope they will make a good report so that we can avoid any war," Dr Mahathir said at dialogue with visiting members of the Japan National Press Club at Seri Perdana this morning.

He said although Iraq had agreed to admit the weapons' inspectors, the threat of war was not over as other accusations, justifying military action, might be levelled against the oil rich nation.

"For the time being I think there will be a kind of respite until the US feels that Iraq is no longer a threat.

"As for Malaysia, we have always been against any military action against Iraq because such action would simply anger more Muslims and there will be more recruits for the terrorists' group," he said in reply to a question posed by a Japanese journalist.

During the dialogue, Dr Mahathir was asked to comment on a host of issues, ranging from his intended resignation next October to the East Asian Economic Caucus and the threat of terrorism.

On terrorism, Dr Mahathir said allegations that Southeast Asian countries were a safe haven for terrorists were half-truths.

Acknowledging that terrorists do exist in the region, he said every possible action had been taken to eradicate the menace, especially in Malaysia.

"We had taken action even before Sept 11 and that is why we still have the Internal Security Act. We can detain people if we have evidence that their actions are a threat to the security of our country," he said.

Responding to another question, Dr Mahathir said East Asian countries must unite and form an influential grouping in order to better champion their cause at international fora.

Reaffirming his decision to step down next October, Dr Mahathir said he would prefer to step down before the next general election so that he could campaign for the Barisan Nasional, not as a candidate, but as a supporter.

Later in the evening, Dr Mahathir played host to more than 200 high school students from Tokyo who had asked the Prime Minister to host them.

Dr Mahathir delivered a short speech and engaged the Tokyo Metropolitan Kokusai High School students in a brief dialogue.

The students were visibly overjoyed with the opportunity to meet Dr

Mahathir and his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali.

Apart from posing for pictures with "one of the famous world leaders in Japan", one of them asked: "Why did you choose to become the Prime Minister?"

A smiling Dr Mahathir replied: "Actually I just wanted to play some role in the development of my country but by God's grace I moved up and was eventually appointed as the Deputy Prime Minister. Later when the then Prime Minister wanted to step down due to ill health, they appointed me by tradition."