

Dr M hopes war can be avoided

STAR 1 2 JAN 2003

BY MERGAWATI ZULFAKAR

PUTRAJAYA: With the rapid build-up of US troops in the Gulf, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is hoping that "some miracle" will happen to avoid a war in Iraq.

The Prime Minister, who met British Foreign Minister Jack Straw on Friday, said there was a 50-50 chance to avoid a war.

"I am hoping that some miracle will happen that will stop the war. There is a 50-50 chance now to avoid war. There was a little bit of uncertainty before but there is less uncertainty now," he told reporters after a meeting with some 80 scouts from Britain.

Dr Mahathir's remarks came in the wake of US Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld signing orders on Friday to deploy nearly 35,000 more troops to the Gulf.

The order is the biggest since the Pentagon increase its troops and forces in recent weeks to more than double the 60,000 US troops in the Gulf while President George W. Bush decides whether to order an invasion of Iraq over weapons of mass destruction.

The US Air Force this week began sending B-1B bombers from Ellsworth,

South Dakota, and will send F-15C fighters and F-15E attack jets, Predator unmanned spy planes and radar aircraft in the coming days.

Asked on his meeting with Straw, Dr Mahathir said the foreign minister told him that Britain hoped that there would not be a war.

"They think it should be something that the United Nations should decide. They generally agree with the general opinion on the stand that should be taken against Iraq," he added.

Asked whether he was convinced with the explanation given as Britain is seen a strong supporter of the US in launching the war, the Prime Minister replied: "They think, perhaps, they can influence the US. I am not talking about whether I am convinced or not, that is what he told me."

On the travel advisory that Britain had issued against Malaysia, Dr Mahathir said Straw agreed that they should re-word the advisory.

"We expressed our unhappiness over Britain lumping us together with all countries in South-East Asia and giving general advice that the area is unsafe, and that includes Malaysia. I think they should be more specific."

During his dialogue with the British

scouts, Dr Mahathir was asked how Britain and Malaysia could improve world peace.

"We should keep on talking that wars cannot solve any problems. Once the idea of peace is implanted at a young age, it will become part of the system and culture," he told the scouts who are here for a four-day visit after the World Scout Jamboree in Thailand. They will leave today after experiencing home stay with Malaysian families, including Felda settlers.

Dr Mahathir also told them that it was better for them to experience Malaysia personally than rely on media reports which misinform on the situation in the country.

"People believe Malaysia is not a safe place. There are reports that bombs exploded and when we say no, they say Bali. But you see for yourself Thailand is peaceful just like Malaysia."

He also joked with them that when they return to Malaysia as adults, they could get a traditional Malay wedding or spend their honeymoon here.

Also present was Chief Scout of Malaysia Tan Sri Dr Sulaiman Daud and British High Commissioner to Malaysia Bruce Cleghorn.