

SUN 2 JUL 2003

KL sets up anti-terror centre on its own

PUTRAJAYA: Malaysia has dropped the United States as partner in a regional anti-terrorism centre opened here yesterday, Foreign Minister Syed Hamid Albar said.

Stressing that the decision to go solo was not "politically motivated", he said Washington had indicated that it was keen on cooperating closely with Malaysia.

US President George W. Bush had proposed the establishment of the centre last year after thanking Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for Malaysia's cooperation against terrorism.

However, bilateral ties have been strained recently owing to the prime minister's strong criticism of the US-led war on Iraq.

Malaysia's establishment of the Southeast Asia Regional Centre for Counter-Terrorism on its own is seen as partly due to political sensitivities in the country, which earlier dismissed suggestions it would involve the deploy-

ment of US troops in Malaysia.

"We have discussed with the US our wish to set it up on our own and they have no objections," Syed Hamid said after launching the centre.

"I don't think there was political motivation when we made the decision. We have discussed (it) with the US and since this does not involve operational matters, it would be better that we organise it ourselves.

"We have always taken a policy decision that we do not believe in having forward defences and bases in any country

"I think it is pursuant to that policy that we have kept this centre as our own and, at the same time, we welcome collaboration with the US to get their expertise and that of other countries."

The US embassy in Malaysia had no immediate comment on Syed Hamid's remarks, and referred reporters to a statement made to the House of Representatives last Friday by chief of

the US Pacific Command Admiral Thomas Fargo.

Fargo said the centre "represents an important opportunity to enhance regional efforts in combatting terrorism".

"By providing expertise, information and funding, when appropriate, we can assist Malaysia and other nations in Southeast Asia in developing the skills necessary to defeat terrorism," he said.

Syed Hamid said although the centre would be fully funded by Malaysia, the United States and other countries could sponsor specific courses and training.

He reiterated that the centre would not serve as an intelligence agency nor would it be involved in operations.

The centre, headed by senior diplomat Zainal Abidin Mahamad Zain, is temporarily based at the Foreign Ministry here but is scheduled to shift to its new premises in Kuala Lumpur by December or January - AFP