

# Howard: I will not dignify Dr M's comments

star 11/10/03

**CANBERRA:** Australian Prime Minister John Howard said he will not "dignify" criticism from Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad that Australia was a "transplant" in Asia that acted like a "deputy" of the United States.

However, Howard retreated from an earlier declaration he would be prepared to make pre-emptive military strikes against terrorists into neighbouring countries, a position widely condemned in the region.

His Malaysian counterpart, who retires later this month, has long been a harsh critic of Australia and the US.

Australia, which contributed troops to the US-led war in Iraq and is a dogged supporter of Washington, acts like a "deputy general in the region," Dr Mahathir told reporters at a summit of Asean leaders in Bali this week.

"Australia is some sort of transplant from another region," he said.

Last year, Howard backed US President George W. Bush's pre-emptive military strike doctrine and said Canberra would do the same if Australian interests in Asia were endangered by terrorists.

Canberra was behaving "as if these are the good old days when people can shoot aborigines without caring for human rights," Mahathir said at that time.

Asked about Mahathir's swipes this week, Howard said the Malaysian leader "has had a long-standing problem with Australia."

"I've long since given up dignifying his comments with responses," Howard told Australian Broadcasting Corp radio.

"It's better to let it just slide away because he is now retiring."

Even so, when asked about his earlier support for pre-emptive strikes, Howard retreated from the aggressive policy outlined last year in the wake of the Oct. 12 Bali bombings, which killed 202 people including 88 Australians.

"I'm certain that the levels of cooperation that we now have (in Asia) are such that if we now have concerns about particular activities in particular countries there would be responses from those countries," he said. — AP