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Mahathir-Force

DON'T ATTACK, WIN HEARTS AND MINDS OF GOVTs, DR MAHATHIR TELLS US

By: Siti Hawa Othman

BANGKOK, Oct 22 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has reiterated his call for the United States to stop using force and acting like the world's sheriff in dealing with countries.

Suggesting that the superpower change its stance to winning the hearts and minds of people and governments rather than resorting to force, he said Washington should understand the problems faced by some governments in administering their countries.

"They should not apply sanctions quickly but try to understand their problems as different countries have different problems," he said when responding to a question as to how the US could mend its ways after reaching a low point in its relationships with Muslim countries at a media conference at the end of the Asia Pacific Economic Leaders' Meeting here today.

Dr Mahathir said that previously, many were supportive of the US as the country had given out aid and been sending peace corps to many countries to help in their socio-economic development.

"But over the years, its policies have changed after becoming the sole world superpower by resorting to sanctions and even threatening military action even when there was no sufficient grounds to attack," he said in obvious reference to the attack and invasion of Iraq over claims it possessed weapons of mass destruction when none was found so far.

The Prime Minister said: "When a country is faced with threats, they have to take (a) certain (course of) action."

"Such a situation in the country would force governments to act in a particular way," he said.

Turning to his earlier remarks that there were some minor successes achieved at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) Ministerial Meeting in Cancun, despite the failure of the talks, he said that to some, Cancun was a success because it was the first time developing countries stood up to say that "they do not agree with what was being discussed."

Dr Mahathir was referring to the pressure applied by developed countries to introduce multilateral rules on new issues such as investment, competition, trade facilitation and transparency in government procurement and their reluctance to disband subsidies on agriculture which disadvantaged poor and developing countries.

He said that no country would undertake trade with another which would impoverish them, but rather do so, so that it benefits from that trade.

The leaders, he said, had deliberated not only on financial reforms but business practices as well.

Dr Mahathir said that since it was his last presence at Apec as Prime Minister, he was given the honour by Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra to talk on the need for reform in the international financial regime.

He said that the Asian financial crisis had raised the need to curb a few people from destroying the economies of the region.

"The general consensus from the meeting was that there is a need to look at the financial regime and make the reform and changes," he said, noting that at the moment, there was nothing to curb currency traders who attacked regional currencies which led to the 1997/98 financial crisis.

"With them (speculators) having lots of money, they can still mount an attack on East Asia and maybe Russia, Brazil, Argentina and also Italy. So there must be a serious look at today's financial architecture," he said.

On bilateral free trade agreements, he said Malaysia first felt that it was not quite right as some Asean countries had already agreed on the Asean Free Trade Area (AFTA) and then were making FTAs with those outside the region.

However, with the proliferation of FTAs, Malaysia could not lag behind and would be clinching FTAs with Japan, China and the US.

"However, I am afraid that FTAs would undermine multilateral trade agreements as it is moving too fast and would be damaging to trade," he said.

On his bilateral talks with his Thai counterpart, he said both countries would try to identify areas to work together.

Thaksin, he said, had come up with a new diplomacy in having joint Cabinet meetings with Malaysia and other countries in Asean.

On the Look East policy, he said Malaysia would still look at Japan as a good model. "We will look at what is right and wrong. We will learn the mistakes (made) by Japan and we will learn how they recover," he said.

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