

17 AUG 2003

DR MAHATHIR TELLS MUSLIM NATIONS TO UNITE OR FALL ONE BY ONE

By: Mokhtar Hussain

DAMASCUS, Aug 17 (Bernama) -- Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad warned Sunday that Muslim countries could fall one by one if they stay disunited and not be able to manage the resources which they have at their disposal.

"The invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq should serve as a loud wake-up call for us Muslims. We can no longer stay disunited if we do not want to fall one by one," he said.

Dr Mahathir, who is a strong critic of the US-led invasion of Iraq, said that Muslims must acquire information knowledge and technology and keep abreast with the developments in the Western world.

"Malaysia strongly believes that with financial wealth and natural resources at our disposal, Muslim countries can become strong if we manage our internal affairs well," he said at a state dinner hosted by Syrian President Dr Bashar Al-Assad at the People's Palace (Qasir Al-Shaab).

Dr Mahathir is leading a 70-member delegation comprising Cabinet Ministers, Menteri Besar and Chief Ministers as well as leaders of at least 22 companies on a two-day visit beginning Sunday, aimed at enhancing cooperation in trade and technology know-how.

The Prime Minister earlier held four-eye talks with President Al-Assad at the Presidential Palace. He also co-chaired a delegation meeting between both countries with Syrian Prime Minister Mustapha Mero.

The leaders then witnessed the signing of nine agreements and memorandums of understanding (MoUs) including on Science and Technology Cooperation and Statistics Cooperation. Also signed was an MoU on a news exchange programme between the Malaysian National News Agency (Bernama) and the Syrian Arab News Agency (Sana).

Dr Mahathir said that Muslims today were weak and divided and being discriminated against in the West. Islamic countries were invaded on the pretext of either harbouring terrorists, or on mere suspicion of possessing weapons of mass destruction. Several more Islamic countries were now being threatened or targeted for "regime change".

"There exists a trend of the law of the jungle, where might is right, to be applied in resolving international disputes. Weak and least developed nations, many of them Islamic nations, are vulnerable and could become easy preys for invasion and colonization," he said.

On terrorism, Dr Mahathir reiterated that a universally-accepted definition of terrorism was vital to enable the international community to counter the scourge effectively.

Touching on the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, the Prime Minister said that the US-engineered road map for solving the Palestinian problem would have had a better chance of success if Iraq had not been invaded.

"As it is, there is now an Iraqi insurgency in addition to the Palestinian problem. And terrorism still threatens the world," he said.

Dr Mahathir also stressed that a comprehensive peace in the region could not be achieved without the participation of Syria and Lebanon in the peace process.

"Malaysia therefore supports and calls for the inclusion of the Golan Heights and Sheba Farm in the road map if a permanent peace in the region is to prevail," he said.

The Syrian Arab Republic, with a total land area of 185,180 sq km, borders Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. It has a population of 17 million with some 40,000 living in the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.

Trade between Malaysia and Syria was rather small, at US\$67.3 million last year, favouring Malaysia with total export of US\$66.3 million.

-- BERNAMA

MOK AZZ RM