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Insensitive

MAHATHIR INSENSITIVE, SAYS AUSSIE LEADER

By: Neville D'Cruz

MELBOURNE, Feb 26 (Bernama) -- The Australian Opposition leader Simon Crean said that Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad's comments that victims of the Bali bombing were collateral damage were "totally insensitive".

At a meeting of the Non-Aligned Movement summit in Kuala Lumpur, Dr Mahathir said that if people who died in Afghanistan and those dying from lack of food and medical care in Iraq were considered collaterals, should not the 3,000 who died in New York and the 200 in Bali also be considered as collaterals.

"I was interested to read what he had to say and I disagree with him," Crean is reported by the Australian Associated Press as saying.

"It was totally insensitive in the circumstances but what we've got to do is to not overreact to those circumstances and understand the context in which they're being made."

Prime Minister John Howard would not be drawn on Dr Mahathir's statements. "I won't dignify those comments with a response," he told reporters. He said sometimes people could convey their feelings more powerfully by saying nothing.

Crean said that if Australia got behind the authority of the United Nations on Iraq the sorts of allegations Dr Mahathir was making could not be made.

"The last thing we want is a war that's portrayed as the West versus Islam," Crean said. "You can't say this is West versus Islam if you've got the UN behind the authority that is the disarmament."

Crean said that he was interested to read comments by South African President Thabo Mbeki at the same conference that the disarmament of Iraq had to occur in accordance with United Nations resolutions.

"I believe that if we pursue this through the UN, pursue the diplomatic means that is the best way forward and the only way forward and the sorts of allegations that Dr Mahathir is reported to have made -- those sorts of allegations can't be made," he said.

Crean said that Dr Mahathir's anti-war comments strengthened the Australian Labour Party's position that there should be no war without United Nations approval.

Crean called on the Howard government to reveal what preparations it had made for a likely flow of refugees from Iraq in the event of a protracted war.

-- BERNAMA

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