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NAM-Wrapup

PEACE IS PARAMOUNT, SAY LEADERS AND THEIR WIVES

By Neville D'Cruz

KUALA LUMPUR, Feb 24 (Bernama) -- While the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) leaders talked about the threat of war and the desire for peace at their 13th Summit today, the NAM First Ladies made a more direct demand: ``Say No to War.''

Leader after leader advocated a peaceful resolution to conflicts and there was a unanimous plea to Iraq to comply with the United Nations resolution to destroy its weapons of mass destruction to avert a United States-led war.

They also demanded that Israel stop its constant attacks on Palestine and return occupied land to the long-suffering Palestinians. The nuclear standoff with North Korea also troubled the leaders.

The inaugural First Ladies Dialogue adopted a statement which, among other things, called for peace with the slogan: Say No To War.

Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohamed Ali, the wife of the Malaysian Prime Minister, said the dialogue's final statement was mostly on the women's concerns about armed conflicts in several parts of the world.

The statement has been handed to NAM Chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad for possible inclusion in the NAM leaders' statement to be released at the end of their summit tomorrow.

In speeches today, the anti-war theme rang loud and clear.

Much credit was also given to Dr Mahathir. They said Dr Mahathir's inaugural address as NAM chairman was comprehensive and contained views that could make the world a better place.

In his address, Dr Mahahir said his hope was for a revitalised NAM to struggle to ban war. "War must be outlawed," he said.

"That will have to be our struggle for now. We must struggle for justice and freedom from oppression, from economic hegemony. But we must remove the threat of war first."

Dr Mahathir said NAM must endeavour to outlaw nuclear weapons, stop the research and development of lethal conventional weapons and control the arms trade. "We know we are weak. But we also know we have allies in the North. They too want the abolition of wars, the slaughter of people for whatever reason," he said.

UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan asked Iraq to cooperate fully with weapons inspectors to spare its people from suffering.

Saying a US-led war was avoidable, the UN chief said the situation was grave and pleaded with the world community, including NAM, to encourage Iraq to comply with the UN Security Council's resolution to disarm.

Annan, whose speech was delivered by his special representative for Afghanistan, Lakhdar Brahimi, said while the focus was on Iraq, this should not distract NAM from confronting the myriad of political, economic, social, environmental and other challenges in all regions.

South African President Thabo Mbeki, who handed the NAM Chair to Dr Mahathir, called on Iraq to cooperate with the UN weapons inspectors to avoid war. "We must work together to make a statement that we do not want war and we do not want weapons of mass destruction," he said.

Philippine President Gloria Macapagal Arroyo said global security should be sought through nuclear disarmament, the elimination of weapons of mass destruction as well as a balanced and progressive conventional disarmament.

Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee made a "sincere plea" to

Iraq to disarm. "We also expect that if Iraq fully complies, the sanctions against that country should be lifted," he said.

Singapore Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said he believed that all actions over Iraq by US and its allies should respect international law and resolutions of the Security Council.

"In this crisis, we must not lose sight of the humanitarian aspect. The Iraqi people have suffered enough," he said.

NAM's Asian Group is confident that under Malaysia's chairmanship, the movement will work towards a future free of war, disputes, poverty and diseases.

Speaking on behalf of the group, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, the Kuwaiti head of delegation, said cooperation among members was essential to revitalise NAM.

Belarus Foreign Minister Mikhail Khvastov, on behalf of the Europeans, said NAM members must work together to tackle conflicts, environmental degradation, transnational crime and terrorism.

Namibian President Dr Sam Nujoma called for NAM unity in facing trends towards pre-emption and unilateralism pursued by "certain powers".

Representing the African region, Dr Nujoma said inequities of the international trading system, as demonstrated by the trade-distorting agriculture subsidies by most developed countries for their own people, continued to cripple the productivity of African farmers.

Speaking to Bernama during a break, Arroyo said everyone should pay heed to Dr Mahathir. "Your Prime Minister is a very wise man," she said.

"Excellent...more than excellent," Iraqi Foreign Minister Dr Najib Sabri said of Dr Mahathir's speech.

Jamaican Foreign Minister K.D. Knight said Dr Mahathir had clearly expressed the developing world's desire for peace and the eradication of poverty.

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