

# Dr M: Set up rapid response centres to check diseases

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**PETALING JAYA:** Special centres should be set up internationally to rapidly identify diseases so as to avert pandemics, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

With today's speed of travel, a carrier of an infectious disease could travel halfway around the world before symptoms appeared.

"The centres should consist of well-equipped laboratories owned, financed and operated by the international community, manned by competent personnel drawn from all over the world," the former prime minister said during the 5th Asia Pacific Travel Health Conference at a hotel here yesterday.

Dr Mahathir was delivering a keynote address at the conference entitled *Travel Health: View of a Statesman*.

Since poor countries where new diseases were most likely to appear would not be able to set up and man the centres, he said the project should be shouldered by an international organisation like the United Nations and financed proportionately by all countries.

"If an epidemic breaks out, all countries will suffer. Since travelling costs money, people in the rich countries are likely to suffer first because they are the ones who travel most."

Dr Mahathir said inadequate measures in dealing with the spread of diseases associated with travel were also another reason why such centres were necessary.

Citing an example, he said quarantine measures were not foolproof and even put uninfected persons at risk when they are isolated together with those infected.

Dr Mahathir said the centres must be stocked with the best equipment and the best method of vaccine production that are not subject to any intellectual property issues.

In addition, he said medical teams must always wear protective suits and should have special diagnostic kits to enable immediate tests to be carried out.

"Systems and drills should be developed to minimise the risk of infection. The samples must be quickly sent to the nearest centre where laboratory examinations can be carried out."

Dr Mahathir said that although the cost involved in setting up the centres would be high, the money would be well spent, as it was only a fraction of what weapons development and production cost.

In the end, he said it would be cheaper than handling a pandemic.