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PM: Decision to send medical team is due to concern for Iraqis

KUALA LUMPUR, Sat. - Malaysia's decision to send a military medical team to Iraq is because it is concerned for the people of Iraq, Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said.

"We have to send a military medical team because of the dangerous situation there and a military man would know how to look after himself. The military team is UN-mandated," the Prime Minister said in a 15-minute interview aired over BBC's special edition of Asia Today broadcast this morning.

It was Abdullah's first visit to London since taking over from Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamed last October.

He had earlier met US President George W. Bush in Washington where he had mooted the idea of sending a specialist medical team to Iraq.

Abdullah said Malaysia's decision to send a medical team indicated its interest to participate in the reconstruction of Iraq.

On whether the team would be responsible to the UN and not to the US, Abdullah said it would report to whoever was in charge in Iraq.

Abdullah also responded, among others, to a question on whether the war on terror in Southeast Asia had been won.

"It's not completely won but we believe that soon we should see no more threat," he said.

The Prime Minister said he was not looking for a date to declare victory over terrorism but rather for the world to know when something had been achieved "with the region being peaceful with no more incidents".

Malaysia, he said, continued to remain vigilant about terrorist activities, adding that he was confident the nation could be able to handle any new elements of Jemaah Islamiyah that emerge.

On the Barisan Nasional's success in the recent general election, Abdullah attributed it to the party taking a stand on Islam.

"Our stand was to offer Islam based on moderation, respect for the people, a willingness to co-operate and to share power."

He said Islam was progressive and could show the way forward to progress in all fields and reminded Muslims that to seek knowledge was compulsory.

On whether he was an "Islamist", he said he did not like the term and would rather refer to himself as a devout Muslim.

Asked if religion should be part of his political strategy, Abdullah said faith in God was important to him because it influenced him in many ways to be honest, trustworthy and accountable.

To a question on whether Malaysia was an Islamic state as stated by Dr Mahathir, he said he had no problem with that label.

"I told them that this statement by Dr Mahathir was based on the recognition of the achievement that we have made all these years, that is the development of Malaysia and the progress of Muslims today (in Malaysia)."

On whether Malaysia's status as an Islamic state meant that other groups in the country were second-class citizens, Abdullah said:

"There is no such thing as other groups being second-class citizens. We are totally committed to power-sharing with people from other faiths of different ethnic origins."

The last general election, he said, saw non-Muslim candidates winning in Muslim-majority constituencies.

"We are very conscious of the need to keep the balance all the time. We

cannot just talk about participation and sharing of power if people do not see any evidence of this."

Meanwhile, in an interview with the Washington Post, Abdullah said Malaysia had detained 50 people in the past three years who had links with Islamic terrorist networks.

He said Malaysia did not have a domestic terror problem but remained vigilant.

On the Middle East, the newspaper quoted him as saying that the US should demonstrate good faith in addressing the root causes of terrorism in the region and the concerns of moderate Muslims and Iraqis.

Abdullah said he was worried about the perception gap between the Muslim and Western worlds, adding that it will have an impact on security for all if it worsened.

He suggested that both sides engage in dialogue to understand each other better.

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