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PM: World in a state of terror (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Speaking boldly and candidly, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said today the Non-Aligned Movement must work towards sustained peace and shared global prosperity, but described the imminent attack on Iraq as evidence of a war being waged by the West against Muslims.

The Prime Minister said the impending war on Iraq and the failure to act against North Korea, which had admitted to possessing weapons of mass destruction, showed that the West was against Muslims.

"Indeed, it is a war against Muslims and not against the fear of possession of weapons of mass destruction by so-called rogue countries."

Opening the inaugural Non-Aligned Movement Business Forum, Dr Mahathir said although North Korea had admitted it had such weapons, it was only mildly admonished by the West.

The two-day forum, held at the Sunway Lagoon Resort Hotel, will deliberate on economic relations among NAM members and the formation of joint ventures among countries of the South.

The forum runs parallel to the six-day 13th NAM summit at the Putra World Trade Centre in Kuala Lumpur, which ends on Tuesday.

Dr Mahathir's speech drew loud applause from the audience, including South African President Thabo Mbeki, Indonesian President Megawati Sukarnoputri and Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, who were among the leaders, captains of industry, politicians, diplomats and scholars present.

The United States and its strongest ally, Britain, insist that Iraq has such weapons, although United Nations weapons inspectors have found nothing except missiles, which they say exceed the permitted 150km range by 30-odd km.

Dr Mahathir also said the world's paranoia over terrorism would result in countries of the South "sliding into greater poverty" if they were not prepared to deal with the poorer business environment.

He said it was unfortunate that the world had had to do business in a state of terror since the Sept 11, 2001 attacks on the United States.

"It is going to be very difficult. The world will not grow as it used to before Sept 11, 2001.

"We may get used to this, of course, to lower standards, even to slide into greater poverty.

"But if we don't learn how to handle this poor business environment, we can only get worse.

"The world is in a state of terror. We are quite paranoid. We are afraid of flying, of going to certain countries, fearful of certain people.

"We are afraid of white powder, shoes, metal cutlery on aircraft. Recently in Australia, an airport was evacuated because of the strong smell of a delicious Malaysian fruit," the Prime Minister said.

"We do not know how long we will remain in this state of terror. Fighting global terrorists is not like fighting a conventional war against a country."

Global terrorists, he said, belonged to no country.

Dr Mahathir, who is incoming NAM chairman, said NAM member countries must close ranks and adopt a common position to shield themselves against the domination of the world by a few.

He said the dominance of these countries was evident in their control of the international media and institutions dealing with world security and

economic issues.

"The (United Nations) Security Council and the Bretton Woods institutions remain under the firm grip of a few countries. The domination now extends into the imposition of their values and standards in total disregard for the cultures and traditions of others."

Dr Mahathir called on the 114 NAM countries "to send a clear message" that the movement was still relevant and intended to assume a major role in the post-Cold War era.

NAM, he said, was a major consultative forum for developing countries to coordinate positions on crucial political and economic issues.

"It is still the only forum where heads of state and government of the South can meet to take stock of developments which affect all of us.

"NAM, on behalf of the South, will continue to champion the just cause of a new world order based on justice, equality and democracy in international relations," he said.

However, countries of the South would only be considered major international players if they overcome their own weaknesses.

Ethnic, tribal and religious differences and armed confrontations must be addressed, he said.