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Bid to avert Iraq war as OIC convenes emergency summit

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EFFORTS to avert war in Iraq continue with the staging today of a one-day emergency summit of leaders from the Organisation of the Islamic Conference.

Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad arrived in the oil-rich Arab city yesterday as OIC leaders continue to try to save the lives of millions should war be waged against Iraq by the United States and its allies.

The summit is seen as an ongoing effort to prevent the war as well as seek a winning formula for a peaceful solution to the Palestinian conflict.

Dr Mahathir, fresh from taking over as chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement which held its 13th summit in Kuala Lumpur last week, is expected to brief the Doha meet on certain decisions made by NAM pertaining to the Iraqi situation.

He is also expected to enlighten his colleagues on the deliberations of the informal OIC meeting just after the NAM summit.

Dr Mahathir is accompanied by his wife, Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar and senior Wisma Putra officials.

Dr Mahathir, who will go on two months' leave after the summit, was met on arrival by the Emir of Qatar, Shaikh Hamad Khalifa Al-Thani.

The summit is being held at the Ritz-Carlton amid tight security. Qatar is the chairman of the OIC and is expected to pass the baton to Malaysia when Kuala Lumpur hosts the next summit in October.

The emergency meeting, referred to here as the "extraordinary Islamic summit", will be held for only one day.

It is not yet known how many of the 40-odd countries attending are to be represented by their heads of government or state.

Speaking to Malaysian newsmen immediately on arrival, Syed Hamid said this summit was very important, coming immediately after the meeting of Arab leaders in Egypt a few days ago.

"The OIC must project a picture of unity if we are going to help resolve the issues before us," he said.

He said a joint communique was expected to be issued after this summit. Dr Mahathir is scheduled to be the first speaker, followed by an audio-visual message from Palestinian President Yasser Arafat.

Syed Hamid was optimistic that the summit would bring OIC members closer together.

"They must send a very strong and clear signal that the use of force is not an acceptable way to bring about leadership change, especially in another country. Islamic countries must state their case in clear terms if we are to salvage whatever dignity and honour still there," he said.

Asked whether the summit would yield concrete decisions or plans of action to avert war, the minister said the immediate concern was to defend the principles of non-aggression.

"It may look rhetorical, but we must continue to shout and tell everyone that war is not an acceptable way to resolve issues," Syed Hamid said. "We must keep hammering this point through."

Asked if the absence of many heads of government or state would have any adverse impact on the summit, Syed Hamid said it was important to understand that foreign ministers in the OIC could make their country's

stand known and accepted.

Arab leaders, in their meeting in Egypt, will also be briefing the summit, especially on their collective decision not to allow the facilities in their countries to be used by invading forces or to mount a strike against Iraq.

"The OIC must make it known, again and again if need be, that we reject war; and the weapons inspectors be given more time to do their job."

Dr Mahathir can be counted on to share his thoughts on the issues facing OIC members, and bring other leaders up-to-date on the positions taken by NAM on the Iraqi and Palestinian issues.

As in his speech at the NAM summit in Kuala Lumpur, Dr Mahathir is expected to plead with OIC members to stand united and work together to prevent a war that will almost certainly have far-reaching political, economic and social implications all over the world.