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Call for fairer veto system (HL)

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DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad, a fervent advocate of reforms in the United Nations, took his campaign to the heart of the world body yesterday, calling for its single-country veto system to be replaced with a fairer and more democratic process.

Speaking for the last time at the UN General Assembly as Prime Minister, he proposed a new system where two veto powers backed by three other members of the Security Council are required to block any UN resolution. CNN carried the speech live.

However, he said, even this should eventually be dismantled in favour of the majority decision of the Security Council.

"If we want to have democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights, the powerful must demonstrate their commitment to all these noble ideas. And they can begin by restructuring the UN, in particular the abolition of the undemocratic single country veto," Dr Mahathir, who is retiring next month as Prime Minister, told the 58th session of the Assembly.

He said the UN stood to lose its relevance if nothing was done to stop powerful nations from undermining it, stressing that the world body was weak, undemocratic and had already lost its way. Its intended role in international governance to help poor and young nations bridge the social and economic divides would be severely compromised.

"This august institution, the UN in which we had pinned so much hope, despite the safeguards supposed to be provided by the Permanent Five, is today collapsing on its clay feet, helpless to protect the weak and the poor.

"The UN can just be ignored, pushed aside, gesticulating feebly as it struggles to be relevant. Its organs have been cut out, dissected and reshaped so they may perform the way the puppet masters want."

The Permanent Five of the Security Council - the victors of World War II namely Britain, China, France, Russia and the United States - are vested with veto powers, with which any one of them could singularly frustrate the rest of the 191-member nations by voting against their wishes.

As a result of the veto powers, the entire UN, including the General Assembly where all member nations are equally represented, is subservient to the Security Council, which has become the centre of power for the world body.

"(The General Assembly) is unfortunately subservient to the UN Security Council, which in turn is subservient to any single one of the five victors of a war fought more than half a century ago.

"It is hardly a democratic forum but it is all that the great civilisation of the late 20th and 21st centuries has; a civilisation that is supposed to uphold freedom."

Dr Mahathir said of late, as in the case of the United States-led invasion of Iraq, the UN was bypassed by Washington and its allies, further diminishing its role and functions.

The speech attracted considerable interest not only for it being Dr Mahathir's last before stepping down at the end of next month, but also because it came at a time when the UN was taking a critical look at its relevance, after the Iraqi affair.

UN secretary-general Kofi Annan is expected to embark on a difficult task of trying to reform the world body, and making it more accountable to

all members.

"If we want to have a democracy, the rule of law and respect for human rights, the powerful must demonstrate their commitment to all these noble ideas."

Dr Mahathir said they can start by restructuring the UN, especially to abolish the single country veto. Dr Mahathir proposed a modified veto that would require the support of two permanent, and three elected members of the security council, to block any UN resolution.

He said the unipolar world dominated by Washington was leading the world to economic chaos, political anarchy, uncertainty and fear as Washington was promoting and imposing political and economic reforms that most of the world was not ready or willing to accept.

He said the developing and poor nations were seeing a resurgence of European imperialism, which many had thought would be in the form of economic dominance, where the newly-independent nations would be brought to their knees and beg to be recolonised in other ways.

"But today we are actually faced with the old physical occupation by foreign forces, and that even if we are totally innocent, there is nothing to prevent trumped up charges to be made against us.

"Puppet regimes are installed dancing as puppets do."

Dr Mahathir said there was a great need to restore the integrity and credibility of the UN, and warned delegates of the dangers when opinions of others were not heard. The current situation was akin to Saddam Hussein's Iraq where criticisms were forbidden, and that led to further abuse.

"But at the end of the day the situation became intolerable and a revolt took place.

"That was what happened to Saddam Hussein on a national scale. That can also happen on an international scale. Free speech provides the safety valve, the absence of which must lead to an explosion eventually."

Dr Mahathir also said the world, which was moving too fast, had lost its way too.

"If we dare to admit it, much of the problems that we face today are due to the arbitrary expropriation of the land of the Palestinians in order to create the State of Israel to solve the European Jewish problem."