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Dr M urges Muslim nations to close ranks, speak with one voice

Ahmad A. Talib

SPEAKING plainly, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad on Wednesday renewed his call to Islamic countries to "close ranks" and "speak with one voice", or face continued marginalisation.

The Prime Minister made this call at the one-day extraordinary summit of the Organisation of the Islamic Conference here.

Set against the deteriorating situation in the Middle East, Dr Mahathir said: "At this crucial and challenging time, Muslim countries must close ranks and be willing to work together to prevent war against Iraq and to help the Palestinians.

"For far too long, we have been marginalised while important decisions affecting the Muslim ummah have been decided and imposed upon us from the outside. The OIC's voice has not been shown due consideration because we have failed to speak with one voice."

Dr Mahathir's umpteenth call is even more urgent as the prospect of war on Iraq waged by US President George W. Bush and backed by British Prime Minister Tony Blair looms bigger. Bush has ordered 60,000 more ground troops to join the 200,000 already on alert in various parts of the Middle East.

This, coupled with Bush's readiness to attack Iraq with or without the sanction of the United Nations Security Council, prompted the OIC to hold the summit just one day after the start of the Muslim New Year.

Led by Dr Mahathir, Malaysia is among more than 40 OIC members who gathered here to try to find ways to stop the war and advance the Palestinian cause.

Malaysia is set to take over the chairmanship of the OIC from Qatar when Kuala Lumpur hosts the October summit. The summit is being held amid tight security in this oil-rich country, said to be the wealthiest country on Earth. It has been reported that Qatar's gas reserves can fuel the needs of all American homes for the next 100 years.

The summit is the third among Muslim leaders in the last two weeks, after one in Kuala Lumpur a day after the Non-Aligned Movement and another in Egypt a few days ago.

Dr Mahathir, who arrived on Tuesday accompanied by his wife Datuk Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali and Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, said: "During the informal consultation in Kuala Lumpur, we tried to identify the weaknesses and strength of the OIC. What remains is for us to formulate a strategy that takes into consideration these factors.

"If we cannot agree on even this need to think out our strategies, then we must accept marginalisation as our lot all the time."

The Prime Minister, the first foreign head of government to address the assembly, spoke of the growing worldwide opposition to war against Iraq.

But "only a miracle" can stop the impending military strike, Dr Mahathir said, adding that OIC leaders had to make the miracle happen.

"Malaysia is encouraged by the Iraqi decision to fully co-operate with the weapons inspectors. If they find no weapons of mass destruction, the UN Security Council must then refuse to sanction the war against Iraq."

On Palestine, Dr Mahathir said Israel was using the excuse of the fight against terrorism since Sept 11 to conduct terror attacks against Palestinians. "The bulldozing of Palestinian houses in order to kill the families of suspected terrorists is totally immoral. The Jews who suffered so much during the Holocaust should know the suffering that they are

causing.

"World Jewry must persuade Israelis to stop the killing of Palestinians. Only then can we expect Palestinians not to retaliate in kind."

The summit is expected to issue a joint communique at the end of its deliberations. Coming almost immediately after Arab League leaders met in Egypt on the same issue, the summit here is expected to echo the anti-war sentiment.

Dr Mahathir said: "The situations in Iraq and Palestine are linked. The Middle East cannot be stabilised merely by attending to the Iraqi problem alone. Indeed the war against Iraq is likely to worsen the Middle Eastern situation and the terrorist problems of the world. Rendering Iraq totally defenceless and ensuring easy victory will not make the war any more acceptable to Muslims.

"Of course, permitting Israel to carry out terror attacks and remain in possession of nuclear weapons and threatening to use them will only anger Muslims more and increase recruits of terror."

Later, at a Press conference in his suite after the lunch break, Dr Mahathir was asked if there had been any change in the stance of participating countries at the summit.

The Prime Minister said members remained anti-war, but there appeared to be a heightened sense that Iraq should exhaust all peaceful means to avert war.

These included asking Iraqi President Saddam Hussein to relinquish his post and seek exile in a foreign country. The pressure on Iraq seemed to be greater now than a week ago, especially with a number of Arab League nations having voiced an opinion that Saddam could avoid war by giving up his job.

Dr Mahathir also noted that summit members agreed that no country within the OIC should offer or allow their facilities to be used by invading forces to mount attacks on Iraq.

The Prime Minister said members were quite clear on this.

"Even though not everyone spoke at the summit, I think it is important that everyone knows what is at stake. There is a clear opinion that invading another country is not the way to overcome problems ... Even the OIC secretary-general said that if this is allowed, then other countries will suffer the same fate," Dr Mahathir said.

Regime change cannot be made through military strikes, he said, adding: "This is simply unacceptable."

The Prime Minister said it was important for Islamic countries not to act in haste or with revenge in mind. They need to address issues properly and with proper, practical strategies.

Just after lunch, the Turkish Prime Minister, Abdullah Gul, paid a courtesy call on Dr Mahathir. It was a long meeting, held behind closed doors with discussions centred on bilateral and current issues.

Turkey has been promised vast sums of money by the United States to allow American forces to use Turkish facilities for a possible Iraq invasion. The Turkish Parliament did not agree, causing share prices on the Turkish stock market to drop considerably.

Dr Mahathir declined to elaborate on the meeting but said that Turkey was under "tremendous pressure".

Abdullah Gul explained the situation likely to face his country if Iraq were invaded, particularly with an influx of refugees from Iraq across the Turkish border.