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Dr Mahathir: United Nations probably at lowest point in 20 years

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said the United Nations is probably at its lowest point since he first delivered his address at the world body in 1982.

He said the United States-led invasion of Iraq represented for the first time countries which decided to sidestep the world body when they sensed that their proposed action would not be approved by the UN.

"This time we have a definite instance where the UN was completely ignored," he told a Press conference on Thursday after delivering his speech at the 58th General Assembly.

The US and Britain, not certain that their arguments for invading Iraq would be accepted by member countries, and sensing vetoes from either France, Russia or China, decided to sidestep the UN Security Council. The five countries, also known as the Permanent Five, are vested with powers to veto any council resolution.

Following the Iraqi incident, there have been calls to reform the UN and make it more relevant, especially on matters of peace and security, so that it will be more in tune with the general feelings of its 191 members.

Dr Mahathir said the decision by the US and Britain hurt the UN's credibility, which would take a long time to live down. And it would be longer still before there is any hope for it to be reformed.

While the UN was democratic, its very structure meant that reforms could not take place because there was a strong possibility that any reform proposal would be vetoed by the Permanent Five.

"We cannot move forward unless of course the Permanent Five are willing to accept that what is happening in the UN is totally undemocratic.

"Since they are all democrats or profess to be democrats they should at least respond to the wishes of the majority. Only then can we see some reforms taking place."

Dr Mahathir said the suggestion that was contained in his speech that the veto powers of the Permanent Five be diluted - for a veto to work it needed two votes from permanent members and three out of the 10 non-permanent or elected members - was also not democratic, but it was slowly moving towards greater democracy.

"I said that (the proposal) should also be done away with as soon as possible ...maybe a modified veto will work, it is a little bit more democratic than having one country paralysing (190 nations) ...that is very undemocratic."

On suggestions that the Security Council be expanded to include more countries as a means to make it more representative of the world body's membership, he said:

"Expansion alone will not resolve the problem. There is always the veto, even if you have 100 members in the Security Council, if one member can veto (any resolution) it will be meaningless. There must be some way of dealing with the veto.

"We expect people to behave themselves.

"Since they set up the ground rules on how to behave in the UN, it is incumbent upon them to respect the ground rules. We do not expect them to sidestep the UN."

He said while the idea of reforming the UN looked like a lost cause, members must continue to push for it.

"Unless the world keeps on hammering that there must be some reforms in

the UN, that the veto power vested on countries that won the war 50 years ago should be removed, then I think there will not be much progress made."

Dr Mahathir said he painted a rather bleak picture of the world because of recent events, such as the way some countries decided to invade others in their fight against terrorism.

"There was only a problem with terrorism, and the front has been expanded to include an attack on Iraq, which has created another problem, and we have not resolved the Palestinian problem," he said.

He added that people were not really keen on looking at the root cause of terrorism, which is the dislocation of the Palestinians.

On Iraq, he said the UN was caught in a situation where while it had been ignored by the US-led coalition, yet a role was demanded of it in post-Saddam Iraq. The world body could not really be held responsible for what was happening there.

Dr Mahathir also said Malaysia would not take part in any peacekeeping operation in post-war Iraq, unless it was a UN-led operation.

He said a lot of people thought that with the removal of Saddam Hussein things would get better immediately with Iraq, but that was not always the case.

There were a lot of adjustments that needed to be done, especially in countries like Iraq that has various ethnic groups all eyeing control of the country.

Dr Mahathir was also asked whether the Organisation of the Islamic Conference, of which Malaysia will be chairman, could be used as an organ for Muslim unity.

He said the Muslims were very weak, divided by their beliefs and interpretations of Islam; and they were further divided into states and political parties.

But if they were united, even for a particular issue, they could exert very great influence on situations faced by the Muslims, such as Iraq.

"It is a question of willingness to come together and apply and make use of the asset they have to protect their interests. So far they have not been able to come together.

"The lack of unity has paralysed them, and until they achieve unity they are going to remain that way."

Dr Mahathir also said the Non-Aligned Movement was still relevant such as on the issues of bridging the gap between the poor and the rich.

He said for example at the World Trade Organisation meeting in Cancun, Mexico, earlier this month, developing countries of NAM could have worked together for their own good.

The rich nations were trying to impose their will on the poorer nations, such as market access, and yet they did not want to offer anything in return, such as abolishing agriculture subsidies in their own countries.

Many developed countries said the talks in Cancun had failed because the poorer nations were not keen to open their markets.

"We do not regard the Cancun meeting a failure. To us it is a success," Dr Mahathir said.

But he cautioned that developing countries would be experiencing strong pressure in the days ahead and many might not be able to withstand the pressure.