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Dr M: Seek moral high ground (HL)

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KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - The 13th Non-Aligned Movement Summit opened today with new chairman Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad calling on members to take "the moral high ground" and seek justice and freedom from oppression and economic hegemony, besides making war illegal to solve the world's problems.

The Prime Minister, in a speech that spared no one - NAM members and non-members alike - also spoke of a vision of a more equitable and just world order, that is free from the belief that killing people is right, that it can solve the problems of relations between nations.

"Unless we take the moral high ground, we will wait in vain for the powerful North to voluntarily give up slaughtering people in the name of national interest," Dr Mahathir said soon after he took over the NAM chairmanship from South Africa's Thabo Mbeki.

Dr Mahathir took to the rostrum soon after Mbeki passed him the chair. Mbeki had earlier expressed confidence that Malaysia would continue to advance the objectives of NAM and pursue its revitalisation so that it would be able to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

In a speech that was also intended to prick the world's conscience, the Prime Minister had the audience in rapt attention as he took them through the maze of today's world woes.

He argued that everyone was now living in fear, that the world was in a terrible mess, a state that was worse than during the East-West confrontation, the Cold War.

He posed a lot of questions pertaining to the state of the world today and invited Heads of Government and State, ministers, senior officials and guests to think deeply over them.

Devoting a substantial section of his remarks to military conflict and other hostilities in world history, Dr Mahathir said:

"Actually, the life of any human being is sacred, no matter if the person is a friend or an enemy. That is why war is not a solution ... But the oppression and injustice is not confined to waging war and killing people; there is oppression in ideological propagation.

"We are now allowed only a democratic system of government. We admit it is by far the best system of government. But applying sanctions, starving people, denying access to medicine in order to force the acceptance of democracy hardly seem to be democratic," he said.

Articulating further that the oppression of the poor by the rich was an injustice, Dr Mahathir also argued that salt was being rubbed into the wounds of the poor when they were told that they lacked transparency and good governance, had no respect for human rights and did not uphold freedom of speech and freedom of the Press.

Countering this, the Prime Minister said: "It is the rich who lack transparency, who do not respect human rights, who curb our rights to speak the truth about what they are doing, who use their media to hide their misdeeds and spread lies.

"How else can we interpret the operations of the hedge funds and the currency traders, sanctions and the systematic bombings of certain countries, the impoverishment of the already poor, and the censorship of news as well as distorted and fabricated reports about the South."

Dr Mahathir also had some words for developing countries, saying that "we are also responsible" for today's mess.

"We have not used our independence and freedom to develop our countries for the good of our people. Instead we have been busy overthrowing our governments, setting up new governments which in turn would be overthrown.

"We have killed our own people by the millions. And frequently, frustrated with anarchic democracy, we resort to autocratic governments, exposing ourselves to much vilification."

The Prime Minister said NAM members must admit that the organisation had not been as effective as it should have been.

"We may want to remain uninvolved and to avoid incurring the displeasure of the powerful countries. But our people are getting restless. They want us to do something.

"If we don't, then they will, and they will go against us. They will take things into their own hands. Unable to mount a conventional war, they will resort to guerilla war, to terrorism, against us and against those they consider to be their oppressors. They cannot be ignored any longer."