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Dr M: War on terror has done more damage than terrorist acts

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WHILE powerful countries have become paranoid about ways to counter terrorism, the security measures they have taken have caused more damage than the actual attacks by terrorists, Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said yesterday.

The former Prime Minister said the invasion of other nations by these powerful nations had not reduced the number of terrorists or their attacks but had worsened the situation.

"It would seem that the greatest powers of the world have got no capacity to learn from the past, from their own recent experience even.

"The lessons of Vietnam have been forgotten and, more recently, lessons of Afghanistan and Iraq have taught them nothing," he said addressing more than 1,000 participants at the Globalisation Forum 2003 at the Naha City Centre here yesterday.

This is Dr Mahathir's first foreign engagement since stepping down as Prime Minister on Oct 31. He was accompanied by his wife Tun Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali.

Former Soviet president Mikhail Gorbachev and former American national security adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski were among the other main speakers at the forum themed "Democracy and Security In the Globalisation Era".

Dr Mahathir said people were being harassed, especially when they travelled by air.

"Frequently, they are pulled aside and subjected to humiliating body search. The result is people are not only afraid to travel but dislike it."

Dr Mahathir said this had caused severe losses to the tourism industry, airlines had gone bankrupt, foreign investments had dropped, leading to recession and the inability of some countries to recover.

The costs of these security measures and their effects were enormous.

"And this is going to cost more in the future because the moment security is relaxed, terror attacks may recur."

Dr Mahathir said where there were no terror attacks in Iraq and no proof that the country was involved in such attacks, such acts were reported daily against coalition forces occupying the country.

If previously foreigners were safe in Iraq, now even the Red Cross and United Nations staff were not.

"Yet there is now talk of extending the war to Syria and Iran. Do we really believe that the Syrians and Iranians would behave differently from the Iraqis if their countries are invaded and occupied?"

Dr Mahathir said the world was obviously no safer despite the paranoid security measures taken and would certainly not be safer if new fronts against terrorists were opened. There must be something very powerful, he said, that moved them to tie bombs to their bodies and blow themselves up or to fly aircraft into buildings and die a horrible death.

"We are not sympathising with them, but we do know what motivates them, and knowing, we have to remove these motivations, no matter how wrong they may be." The longer these were ignored, the longer the world would live in insecurity and terror.

On security, Dr Mahathir said smaller nations did not feel secure anymore as powerful nations interfered in their domestic affairs and the United Nations, created to protect weaker nations was also no longer free to decide whether to act or otherwise.

"But worse things have happened lately. Powerful nations have ignored the UN altogether and invaded and occupied countries under false pretexts," he said, adding that governments of smaller countries could be undermined through propaganda, economic sanctions and political subversion with the objective of putting in place compliant governments or individuals which would be totally subservient to the powerful.

"In other words, the neocolonialism President Sukarno used to talk about is real."

Dr Mahathir also spoke at length on globalisation which he said was an idea whose time had come, but the manner in which it was interpreted was not necessarily correct.

Such ideas came from powerful nations, principally the European countries, which at one time dominated the world through their empires.

He also said it was ridiculous to say Muslims were anti-Semitic.

"Anti-Semitism is a European thing. For 2,000 years, ethnic Europeans persecuted the Jews of Europe. They perpetrated inhuman pogroms, inquisitions and the holocaust. And in the past, when Jews were persecuted in Europe they invariably sought refuge in Muslim countries, in Morocco, Algeria, Egypt and the Ottoman empire."

Dr Mahathir said the Jews would not have sought asylum in Muslim countries if the Muslims had been anti-Semitic.

Indeed, he said, the golden years of Judaism were when the Jews lived in Muslim Spain.

The forum was co-organised by the Institute for International Socio-Economic Studies, Gorba-chev Foundation and The Ryukyu Shimpo newspaper which is celebrating its 110th anniversary.

Later, speaking to Malaysian journalists, he described the forum as good since it provided the speakers and panelists sufficient time to explain issues.

"It was long enough for us to explain things properly but, of course, it is never long enough for everything that you want to say. However, we managed to get across our views and also to hear the views of other people."

He said it was an interesting forum as he could hear other people's perception on issues which were different from "ours".

On his engagements, Dr Mahathir said he would be speaking at three international conferences next month.

"I will be going to Fukuoka (Japan) at the end of this month and then there will be a meeting in Rome and then to Korea."

Dr Mahathir said he would generally be speaking on the same issues at these forums.

When told Malaysians missed him, Dr Mahathir said he was flattered and added: "When people miss me, of course, I am flattered, but the people will get used to the new leadership."

He said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi should be allowed to decide on his choice of deputy and advised Umno members to be calm.

"I think it is proper for him to make his own decision and to announce it," he added.