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PM: Movement must stand united against US strong-arm tactics

KUALA LUMPUR, Mon. - The Non-Aligned Movement must remain united against the strong-arm tactics of the United States, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said tonight.

All 114 member countries, which will meet here this week for the NAM summit, must support the global wave against an attack on Iraq by the US and its ally, the United Kingdom.

"If we have a common stand, that is enough to influence public opinion. The US and UK will have to reconsider international opinion, whether they like it or not," he said in an interview broadcast over RTM1 in conjunction with the summit which begins on Thursday.

Many NAM members were poor, developing nations, and collectively, although it was the second largest grouping in the world after the United Nations, NAM did not have a strong voice, Dr Mahathir said.

"But if we join the current global movement to support a moral cause against (the US') rogue tactics, the movement will gain momentum and this itself is a big contribution," he said when asked about the most effective step NAM could take against a US war on Iraq.

"NAM may have a small voice but without it, it would be worse standing alone."

The interview was conducted by RTM's acting controller for TV news Monshi Abdullah, The Star Publication's executive editor Datuk Wong Chun Wai and Utusan Malaysia's news editor Zaini Hassan.

Dr Mahathir said several times that NAM must remain united. As host nation, Malaysia wanted to see the summit proceed smoothly and all members in agreement on the Kuala Lumpur Declaration to be issued.

"We don't want conflict between any of the members. If this happens, NAM will be weaker. We must be united. It is better to find consensus, even if our decision may not be strong. We don't want issues that will divide us."

Asked if he was satisfied with NAM's achievements, Dr Mahathir said: "We lack solidarity because of our respective problems. Therefore, NAM lacks effectiveness."

He said NAM still had relevance for the future, even though the situation now was different from when the movement was first founded.

"`Non-Aligned' does not mean much today when there is no more East or West bloc. But we still need the movement to face problems from the North."

Asked if certain NAM members, and also members of the Organisation of Islamic Conference, who did not vocalise their opposition to a US strike, should be expelled, Dr Mahathir said such a move was unwise.

These nations had their own reasons and should be influenced instead of expelled, he said.

His wish as the summit's chairman would be to influence NAM members to be wary of policies and systems promoted by the Northern hemisphere, such as the World Trade Organisation, globalisation and human rights. "Many NAM countries are poor and in debt to developed nations, so their ability to speak out is limited. When we criticise the developed world, most agree with us but cannot voice out their opinions."

Asked if he would continue to be "spokesman" for developing nations after his resignation in October, Dr Mahathir said: "I can voice my opinions or accept invitations to speak. I will always be ready to give my opinion if asked."

On full attendance by heads of States and Governments, Dr Mahathir said 58 had confirmed attendance. All 114 member countries, however, would be represented.

"We can't guarantee full attendance. If war occurs, certain representatives might have to leave."

On the summit's agenda, he said terrorism would be discussed in the context of the US and Iraq, since an attack on Iraq would likely provoke further acts of terror.