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It's wise to listen more often to Dr Mahathir

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THE way things are shaping up, the world ought to listen to former Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad more often. This is the man who was once called a recalcitrant. He was unflatteringly called many other things, especially when he announced measures to counter the regional economic slowdown a few years ago.

Critics were aplenty, but Dr Mahathir did what he set out to do, and at the end of the day, he was proven right in whatever he did or said. The critics never learned.

Dr Mahathir has never been selfish with advice. At the Globalisation Forum in Okinawa on Tuesday, he gave out free prescriptions to several "maladies" affecting the world.

He dispensed advice on the occupation of Iraq, nuclear threats from North Korea, the relevance of American bases in Japan and South Korea, democracy and the reformation of the United Nations.

He tactfully fielded every question, making him the darling of the forum. His replies may have been short, but they were sharp.

To begin with, Dr Mahathir said it was best US-led troops serving in Iraq gracefully and gradually left the country and a United Nations-mandated peacekeeping force replaced them.

Otherwise, he cautioned, the soldiers of other countries serving in Iraq would be attacked by the Iraqi people who are unhappy with the presence of the American and British troops.

Call it coincidence, but the very next day, 12 Italian soldiers were killed when their base in Nassiriya was bombed.

Dr Mahathir, who addressed the forum earlier in the day, won praise from his fellow speakers, including former Russian president Mikhail Gorbachev.

Increasingly, more Western scholars and academicians are beginning to accept Dr Mahathir's views on the Palestinian problem, the reasons behind the continued oppression of Muslims and terrorism.

During the panel discussion, Dr Mahathir said that the world is beset with problems today because of people or countries seeing "only one side of the equation".

"We must always think and think very hard and look at both sides of the argument (to find a solution)."

On Iraq, Dr Mahathir said no one had the right to invade the country simply because they did not like Saddam Hussein. He said the invasion of Iraq had nothing to do with weapons of mass destruction (WMD) but more with American domestic politics and Iraqi oil.

"As we all know, Bush never really won the election. So it was necessary to become popular. He was very popular after 9/11.

"So after Afghanistan, it had to be Iraq. He knew very well there were no WMD. It is quite obvious they (Americans) were not telling the truth."

He also spoke on veto power and permanent membership in the UN Security Council.

"It is obvious there are some countries, the US in particular, which are prepared to ignore completely the UN, which means whether people have veto power or not, it will be irrelevant."

He said the veto power was totally undemocratic and that nobody should have it.

"You can have permanent members without veto powers. And permanent members should represent different groups of countries rather than the

people who won the last war.

"So, if we (Western countries) insist that every country should be democratic, we should insist that the UN should also be democratic and the permanent membership to the Security Council abolished."

On the nuclear threat from North Korea, Dr Mahathir said only a mad leader would use such weapons to attack another nation. He said North Korea would be pulverised as the superpowers would surely retaliate. A nation built nuclear capabilities mainly to protect itself.

"For example, if Iran were to have a nuclear weapon, against whom is it going to be used? The apparent enemy is the US. But if Iran tries to use it, it will be totally destroyed because the US is so very strong and so full of nuclear weapons."

He said if one were to treat a country as an enemy, it naturally would prepare its defences.

"So, if you look at it from the North Korean side, they too live in fear."

The reason for this, he said, is they know they will suffer the same fate as Iraq if they are deemed to have done something wrong.

Gorbachev, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1990, said the war on Iraq was a major political mistake. He said when he was president of Russia during the Gulf War, he had initiated perestroika (improved relations) with the US.

"We even supported the US in its fight against Iraq then, as Iraq had invaded a sovereign nation and it should be punished."

Gorbachev was also of the view that the five permanent members on the UN Security Council should not be allowed to monopolise the veto power.

"The UN must be reformed. I feel countries like India, Brazil or even those from African nations could be candidates (to have veto powers)."

Kenneth Quinones, who was the first US diplomat to visit North Korea and meet its leader Kim Il Sung, concurred with Dr Mahathir on Bush's political agenda.

"Since August in the US, more than half the people say they will not vote for Bush as they have realised his mistakes," he said.

He described Bush as an "arrogant and impatient leader" who could not accept criticism of US policies.

Jiang Mingjun, the Chinese representative and chairman of the Global Compact Centre for UN Programme said democracy should not be based on the standards of one country.

He said although China condemned the invasion of Iraq, it would, however, support its reconstruction.

Like Dr Mahathir, Jiang, who is also vice-president of China Council of Northeastern Asia Economic Co-operation, said the US must pull out its troops from Iraq before reconstruction of the war-ravaged nation began.

However, Japanese Government representative Tatsuo Arima and Kim kyungwon, the former South Korean ambassador to the US, seemed to support US policies.

Both, graduates of Harvard University in the United States, said the war on Iraq was justified. They also said said US bases in the Far East were necessary to neutralise threats from North Korea.

Arima, the former chief Cabinet Councillor for External Affairs in the Prime Minister's Office, said the US presence in the Far East was necessary to maintain the balance of power in the region.

Tatsuo, however, commended Dr Mahathir for his leadership and for leading a multi-racial Malaysia to what it is today.

The Korean felt that increasing the number of members in the UN Security Council would weaken the beleaguered body.

"This is because there will be more countries with veto power. The five

members are the only ones who can initiate reforms and there is nothing we can do," he said.

On the younger generation of South Koreans who want the American soldiers to leave their country, Kim said: "They did not see the Korean war (of the early 50s). If not for the US, we would not be what we are today."

Kim said South Korea supported the US in Iraq as the Americans had helped South Koreans during their "darkest hour" (Korean War).

"For us to turn back when the US needs help is not good. We are indebted to the US."

Kim also serves as president of the Seoul Forum for International Affairs, a private set-up concerned with Korea's foreign relations.

Dr Mahathir may have been the one who introduced the Look East Policy two decades ago but the Japanese have, on the quiet, learnt a thing or two from him.

For only two days later, Japan said it would not be sending its troops to Iraq to join the US-led international forces.