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Malaysia turns down US invitation

Syed Nadzri; Kamarul Yunus

MALAYSIA has turned down an US invitation to attend the Madrid Conference, which is to seek donors to implement the US-led development programmes in Iraq.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said Malaysia was currently not in a position to finance development projects in Iraq.

"We are in no position to contribute financially to the development projects. We appreciate the continuation of what is being done there," he told newsmen after meeting US Secretary of State Colin Powell on the sidelines of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec) summit at the Peninsula Hotel yesterday.

During the meeting, Syed Hamid said Powell had asked Malaysia to attend the Madrid Conference to address the financing of development programmes in Iraq.

Donor countries will discuss the reconstruction of Iraq within the framework of UN Security Council Resolution 1483 at the Madrid Conference slated for Friday.

The Madrid Conference will aim to reach a consensus on the framework and priorities for international efforts to boost the reconstruction process and seek financial commitments until the end of next year.

Syed Hamid also said the United States had not requested Malaysia to send troops to Iraq but Malaysia had proposed that the Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC), which held its summit in Putrajaya, last week, send a mission to interact with the Iraqi leaders.

He said Malaysia was appreciative that the OIC meeting did not come up with a resolution that might be prejudicial to the efforts taken by the United Nations on Iraq.

He said the OIC members took note, through the joint communique, of the situation in Iraq.

He also said Powell did not mention any time frame in resolving the Iraq issue.

"We can look towards sending a mission to interact with the Iraqi leadership. It is just an idea," he said.

"As far as the US is concerned, they want to resolve the issue as soon as possible.

"But Malaysia is interested to see that Iraq has started to move towards democracy and is on the brink of holding an election," he said.

Syed Hamid said Powell also sought clarification from him on Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's remarks on the Jews which created apprehensions among the world community.

He said Powell understood the gist of the Prime Minister's text at the OIC meeting but there were one or two points that he pointed out could create apprehension.

"I explained to him about this and there was no difference of views in our discussion. Overall the meeting was very friendly with a positive exchange of views," he said.

Syed Hamid said he told Powell that there would not be a change of policy when Dr Mahathir stepped down on Oct 31.

"As far as Malaysia is concerned, under the new leadership there will be no change in policy.

"Datuk Seri Abdullah Ahmad Badawi will continue with existing policies," he said.

