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Palestine and Iraq the priority now

Firdaus Abdullah; Ramlan Said

IN his maiden Press conference as chairman of the Non-Aligned Movement, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said NAM's immediate priority would be to help resolve the Palestinian issue and to stop the possibility of war over Iraq.

The Prime Minister said: "Our priority at the moment is of course is to help resolve two major problems - one is the Palestinian question and the other the threat of war against Iraq."

At the packed Press conference, he was asked to indicate the way forward for the movement. This, the Prime Minister said, could only be mapped out through active consultations among members, especially those from the troika.

He said: "We'll have to work hard on the way forward because these are practical things that need to be carefully thought out.

"We just cannot say that we are going to do this, that and the other only to find that we will not be able to do them," he said.

Addressing a host of questions from local and foreign journalists, Dr Mahathir also addressed the question of the practical measures that NAM might pursue during Malaysia's tenure as chairman.

He said NAM needed to tackle issues affecting members, particularly the impact of globalisation and the role of the World Trade Organisation.

He said it was vital for NAM to discuss matters of common interest and issues before making representations at any international fora.

"We find that when we do not speak with one voice the tendency is for others to push their ideas through, which obviously will be to their advantage."

Asked for his views on possible attempts by certain quarters to divert world attention from the massive anti-war demonstrations, Dr Mahathir said those who choose to ignore the sentiments of the majority would end up being isolated.

The Prime Minister was also asked whether NAM and the Organisation of Islamic Conference would consider an attack against Iraq as an attack against the two movements.

Dr Mahathir said that since NAM and the OIC are not military alliances, they could not go to war in the event one of their members were attacked.

"But we can try to get moral support for our stand.

"I think moral support in the long run is quite effective."

Asked what would be done to Iraq should there be war against Iraq, Dr Mahathir said he hoped there would not be any "after the war" situation.

"I hope there will be no war.

"But we have often seen that after a war, people will rebuild. The usual habit in this world is that you destroy first, and then you rebuild. It is a waste of money." he said.

Asked by a Croatian journalist whether Dr Mahathir, having staged a "miracle" in Malaysia, would do the same for NAM, the Prime Minister said: "We don't believe in miracles ...we have to work very hard to do everything."

On the North Korea missile testing, he believed the country wanted to negotiate directly with the United States but North Korea was not bent on declaring war on anybody.

"North Korea has weapons - they are being tested. They are nuclear weapons as far as we can make out.

"Other countries are also testing weapons.

"Just because they test does not mean they are declaring war."

To a question whether NAM expects the US to take notice of its views on Iraq, Dr Mahathir said he believed the US would take notice of all protests against war.

"Our decision to oppose war adds to the growing consensus in the world against war.

"The US will not care if it is a lone voice, but I think some people in the US are in the position to make a decision and will take note of the protest."

Asked to comment on France's stance in opposing the US in the Iraq issue, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia appreciated France's position.

"It is a very brave thing for France to do.

"But I also know that by opposing this, it does not mean France wants to uphold the Iraqi Government.

"It is because France is concerned about the cost of war in terms of human rights."

On whether NAM would take up the invitation by President Yasser Arafat to send a fact-finding mission to Palestine, he said the movement welcomed it.

"But I am quite sure Israel will not allow it, as much as it did not allow a fact-finding mission to investigate the Jenin massacre."

On whether NAM would accept China as a member to enhance the movement, Dr Mahathir replied in the negative.