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55 top leaders confirm attendance

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KUALA LUMPUR, Sun. - Fifty-five of the 92 countries that have confirmed their attendance at the 13th Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) Summit here this month will be represented by their heads of state or Government.

Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar said this attendance would be greater than at the last summit in Durban, South Africa, in 1998 where only 30 leaders were present. NAM has 114 member nations.

"The encouraging response from NAM leaders this time around could be due to the many uncertainties that are being faced by the world now, and the fact that the leaders have to show that the movement has not lost its relevance.

"Also, Malaysia has been known to be quite a pulling factor to developing countries, which are impressed with our rapid development," the minister said in his interview with TV1's Selamat Pagi Malaysia from Dataran Merdeka here today.

He told the morning show host Peggy Ng that Iraq too had confirmed its attendance, but it was not known yet at what level it was being represented.

"And we are quite certain that Palestine will also be represented."

At a Press conference later, Syed Hamid said even if war in Iraq were to take place before the summit, "there is more reason for NAM countries and leaders to meet in Kuala Lumpur because we must have a cohesive voice, we must be able to express our message of peace worldwide".

"A war on Iraq would not only affect world stability and peace, but would also worsen the economies of developing countries. We must make NAM a relevant body and ensure that the voices of member nations are heard clearly".

Syed Hamid said up till now, the escalating tensions in Iraq had not resulted in any country pulling out of the summit.

"We hope none will, and we are working hard to ensure that all aspects of the event, especially the security aspect, is well taken care of. Nothing is being taken for granted."

Earlier in his TV interview, Syed Hamid said Kuala Lumpur was given less than a year to prepare for the summit.

"After the last summit in Durban, Bangladesh expressed its intention to play host but it later changed its mind.

"When I asked Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad whether Malaysia should offer itself, he said okay. But then we heard later that Jordan had offered to be host, so we backed down.

"However, in July last year, I received a call from the Jordanian Foreign Minister that due to the tense situation in the Middle East, it decided not to be the host. We are proud and happy to be host and want to show the world that we can do it".