

26/01/2003

PM: Invasion will enlarge terrorism

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PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is still supportive of the fight against terrorism but not the idea of invading Iraq which will enlarge the problem of terrorism and deflect from the work of fighting it.

"Iraq is a side issue. It has been there and not done anything more than what it is doing now," Dr Mahathir said in reply to a question at a dialogue with Media Fellows of the World Economic Forum.

North Korea has admitted it has nuclear weapons but the US is not attacking it and instead there is talk of an attack on Iraq.

"Why is there a difference? Why not talk to North Korea and also talk to Iraq?" he asked.

Asked whether an attack on Iraq will promote terrorism, he said any attack on Iraq was bound to cause death among the innocents and that would anger a lot of people.

"I think many Muslim countries do not like Saddam Hussein. They would like to see him go.

"But they would not like to see the Iraqis pay a high price for that.

"War is not justified. I do not believe in war as a solution to any thing."

Dr Mahathir, who visited Lebanon earlier last week, said he met both Christians and Muslims there and asked them who had won the war. There was no answer because no one won, they killed each other and destroyed their own country.

On whether he would revise his views if the war could be completed in three weeks and the process of reconstruction could begin soon after, Dr Mahathir replied:

"I don't know if an attack can be so precise that it will not cause collateral damage. It will still cause a lot of bitterness."

AntiAmerican sentiments were expressed by many participants of the World Economic Forum.

The Prime Minister said: "The US advocates free speech and as such, it must be prepared to put up with that and must be prepared to listen."

Asked whether the US was being isolated by its hard stand, Dr Mahathir said apart from Australia which is with the US as its "deputy sheriff", even Britain was having second thoughts.

He said there were some Americans who were not in favour of the war.

Asked what he would do if he were the US President, Dr Mahathir said he would study the reasons why somebody would want to crash himself into a tall building and die in that horrible way.

"Remember that it is not only the passengers who died in that way. The passengers may not have known they were crashing into the building but these people were actually piloting the planes into the buildings.

"How many of us are prepared to do that? But they are prepared to do that. There must be a reason. Please find out why."

He said that he was not justifying terrorism. "I am trained as a doctor. I do not treat the symptoms, I treat the causes of diseases. If the cause is frustration and grievance, we have to deal with it.

"We should try and see reason. People who claim to be civilised should try and find out the reason and begin the process of negotiation."

Dr Mahathir said he was not "pro or anti" American but would like to see justice done.

Earlier, Dr Mahathir was a panellist for discussion on Political Islam

and its Discontents. Other panellists were Abdullah Nasseef who is president of the World Muslim Congress, Saudi Arabia, and Hassan Wirajuda, Indonesian Minister of Foreign Affairs.

US Attorney-General John Ashcroft shared the stage with Dr Mahathir during discussions on How the fight against terrorism will change the world.

Others were Alvaro Uribe Valez, president of Colombia; Kumi Naidoo, secretary general and chief executive officer of CivicusWorld Alliance for Citizen Participation, South Africa and Bruce Hoffman, director of the Rand Corp based in Washington.

Dr Mahathir said democracy was compatible with Islam. He pointed out that in Islam, selection of leaders had been done for over 1,400 years.

On his strong statement on suicide bombings at the OIC ministerial meeting in Kuala Lumpur last year, he reiterated that it was wrong and criminal no matter who carried it out - Muslims or non-Muslims.

"It's wrong and criminal. But the fact remains that when people have no other means of recourse, they resort to extreme forms of venting their anger or fighting their course."

Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres, who stopped to talk with Malaysian journalists waiting for Dr Mahathir's Press conference, said: "I liked your Prime Minister's previous speech on terrorism.

"Please give him my regards."