

PM derides West on Islam, Mideast
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Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi today accused Westerners of prejudice against the Islamic world and said Western support for Israel was the biggest reason fuelling Muslim hostility.

"Much of the prejudice against Islam in the West stems from a lack of understanding of the true nature of Islam as a religion professed by 1.4 billion people in the world," Abdullah said.

"Westerners tend to view other peoples and other cultures only from the perspective of Western benchmarks and philosophy," he said as he received an honorary degree at Tokyo's Meiji University.

But Abdullah also denied that history was to blame for current tensions between Islamic and Western societies.

"Explanation is to be found in more recent times, which is the repeated use of force or other machinations by the powerful over the weak, to secure political, strategic or territorial gains," he said.

He said the most urgent problem was the Middle East and criticised Israel for its deadly air strikes, which the Jewish state launched last week on the Gaza Strip in response to rocket attacks on its territory.

Unjust and unfair

The world "must accept the fact that a festering Palestinian problem, among all factors, is the single most important factor perpetuating the tension between the West in general and the Muslim world as a whole," he said.

"We must accept the fact that the plight of the Palestinians has come to epitomise everything that is unjust and unfair to the treatment of peoples," he said.

He said the Islamic world perceived Western nations as defending "Judeo-Christian tradition against the spread of radical militant Islam, thus legitimising all of Israel's actions no matter how brutal," he said.

"When you add to this the invasion of Afghanistan, the conquest of Iraq, the aggression against Lebanon, and the continuing occupation of the Golan Heights, the Muslim world sees a ... complicity," he said.

"The feeling of being humiliated," he said, "has transformed into hostility."

Abdullah is usually seen as more soft-spoken than his predecessor Dr Mahathir Mohamad, who is known for his tirades against the West and Israel.

Abe in KL in August

Abdullah later met with Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and applauded his efforts to get Tokyo more involved in the Middle East.

"Prime Minister Abdullah said he applauded the recent changes in Japan's diplomatic policy, particularly its high interest in the Middle East," said a Japanese government spokesman who attended the meeting.

Japan, the world's second-largest economy, has sought a wider role in the area, most notably by planning a major agro-industrial complex to create jobs for Palestinians in the West Bank.

Resource-poor Japan depends on the Middle East for almost all of its oil imports.

"Playing its role in the region is very important for Japan when it tries to win a permanent seat on the Security Council," Abdullah said, adding that Malaysia backed Tokyo's longstanding goal at the United Nations.

Abe told Abdullah he would like to visit Malaysia in August, the official said.

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