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Dr M: The world must stand with Rohingyas

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KUALA LUMPUR: Former prime minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad has called the persecution of Rohingya Muslims a "human tragedy" and is urging the international community to help end their plight.

Calling on the world to wake up to the unfolding tragedy, Dr Mahathir condemned Myanmar's decades-long persecution of its stateless Rohingya minority.

"I feel much saddened by the events taking place in Myanmar. I was instrumental in getting Myanmar to become a member of Asean.

"Myanmar, geographically, is definitely a part of Southeast Asia, and its exclusion would be contrary to the idea of Southeast Asian unity.

"But now, we find that Myanmar is not treating its own people the way we treat Myanmar," he said in a speech on Tuesday at an international gathering on the plight of Myanmar's persecuted Rohingyas in Oslo, Norway.

Dr Mahathir said he hoped the international community would step in to put an end to the oppression, which has forced tens of thousands of Rohingyas to flee the country by land and sea.

"I hope the international community will focus on the problem of the Rohingyas who are being forced to flee in ships to other countries.

"They should live and be allowed to live in Myanmar without oppression. There should be tolerance for

peoples of other religions," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Malaysia, for example, was able to accommodate the various races in the country by offering them equal citizenship and opportunities.

"Malaysia also has a lot of people from other countries who have settled here in the last 200 years or so. We decided that they have a right to be citizens of Malaysia, to be given political rights, and to be allowed to live and earn a living in Malaysia. We regard them as our citizens."

Dr Mahathir said unlike Malaysia, the Myanmar government refused to recognise the Rohingyas despite them having resided in the country for 800 years.

"This is grossly unjust on the part of the government of Myanmar. I had expected that those who benefited from our struggle to get Myanmar to release (Aung San Suu Kyi) that they would realise that oppression by the government is something that is intolerable.

"And yet, few people from Myanmar have risen to the occasion to defend the rights of the Rohingyas, who, after all, are citizens of Myanmar."

Dr Mahathir was speaking at the Oslo Conference to End Myanmar's Systematic Persecution of Rohingyas, where leaders from around the world sought concrete ways to end the decades-long persecution of the Rohingyas.