

'UN weak because it can't act against injustices'

NEW YORK: The United Nations (UN), despite being a major multilateral organisation, is weak because it cannot act against injustices, Prime Minister Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad said.

From forest fires that envelop neighbouring countries in hazardous smog to atrocities against a country's citizens, the UN does not have the capacity to interfere in what it deems "domestic" affairs of nations.

"We can preach. We can pray. We can ask them, 'Please don't do such things', but they can continue doing it because we don't invade countries to remove such regimes," Dr Mahathir said.

He was speaking on the topic "Rule of Law and Multilateralism" at Columbia University's World Leaders Forum on Wednesday.

About 300 people packed the university's Low Memorial Library hall for the one-hour session.

He said the challenge to multilateralism was unilateralism, where powerful countries made decisions and acted on their own, in their own interest, without due regard to other countries affected by what they did.

"The problem is that we don't respect the UN.

"Big countries, powerful countries, just disregard the UN and

its resolutions.

"When big countries disregard the UN's resolutions, small countries will follow suit.

"So now we are seeing even small countries like Myanmar can thumb its nose at the UN."

He said the UN system did not allow interference in countries' affairs, but there would come a time when a problem like forest burning could cause the whole world to be enveloped in haze.

"At that time, I think the UN might say that this is not a national problem or a domestic affair, but a problem for the world, and the world should exercise the right to take action.

"If we have that frame of mind, then we can do something."

He reminded the audience that when Iraq's Saddam Hussein was accused of killing people and being a dictator, the United States interfered and removed him from power.

"But in the case of Myanmar, it seems nobody wants to invade and overthrow the government. So for a long, long time, the people in Rakhine State will have to suffer."

Dr Mahathir said it is "unfortunate" that Aung San Suu Kyi, the Myanmar leader and Nobel Peace Prize recipient, had not stood up against atrocities inflicted

ed on the nation's Rohingya minority.

"We sympathised with her and campaigned to get her released, but now we find that she is not standing up for other people who are distressed.

"We had hoped that she would not back her government, but apparently she has not, because she cannot, or because she would not."

On how Malaysia dealt with the rising influence of powerful nations in the region, he said: "We have to accept that we are not going to be able to go to war with them.

"In many instances, we have to give in."

Citing China's claims on the South China Sea, he said the Asian superpower could claim the seas, as long as ships were allowed to pass through.

"That is their claim. We can claim that Australia belongs to us, but Australia won't care because it's not going to happen."

He said by not disputing China's claim but accepting the best it could, Malaysia could still benefit from it.

"The fact remains that in the South China Sea, the Straits of Malacca is necessary for East-West trade.

"You close that and China itself will suffer."