

UK Press plays up Dr M's criticism

WST 23 SEP 1993

From
S. Jayakrishnan

LONDON, Wed. — Malaysian Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's criticism of Britain's handling of the war in Bosnia made to his British counterpart, Mr John Major, during his official visit to Kuala Lumpur was highlighted by many British newspapers today.

The Times, in a front page report under the heading "Major attacked by Malaysian leader over war in Bosnia", said the Prime Minister's trouble-hit tour of the Far East ran into further controversy following the attack by Dr Mahathir.

The paper reported that Dr Mahathir cast aside protocol at a formal dinner in honour of Mr and Mrs Major on their arrival in Kuala Lumpur from Japan.

It said that the Malaysian Prime Minister had demanded military action to end "this ongoing holocaust".

The broadside from Dr Mahathir caused Major, who had drafted a conventional speech praising Malaysia, to rewrite part of his

text as the Malaysian leader lambasted his guest.

The Prime Minister, who looked taken aback by the unexpected attack, defended Britain's role, saying that it had led the world and taken steps that probably saved hundreds of thousands of lives.

The Times said the latest setback to Major on his travels came after his plans to confront Tory rebels at the party conference next month leaked out in a bizarre repetition of his "bastards" gibe against Cabinet dissidents.

The off-the-record comments, apparently made between a series of television interviews given on Sunday night at the British embassy in Tokyo, were picked up by a reporter's tape recorder and published in a newspaper yesterday.

In the "pirate" tape of his private conversation, the Prime Minister echoed his previous attacks on Tory critics, this time describing them as "barmy". He also gave away plans to attack his opponents in the highly-charged atmosphere of the party conference in Blackpool.

The *Guardian* reported today that Major flew into Malaysia on the second leg of his troubled Far East tour and walked straight into a new problem.

The paper said Dr Mahathir used a welcoming speech to attack Britain's failure to intervene with military force on behalf of the Muslims in Bosnia.

Major, who had hoped to concentrate on the issue of trade during his 24-hour visit, found himself deflected, as he had been in Tokyo by questions about his leadership at home, into defending British policy in the former Yugoslavia.

Dr Mahathir related harrowing tales of Serbs raping a six-year-old girl to his dinner guests, saying: "Our heart cries out to the tragedy of an entire race being wiped out in total disregard for even elementary decency...we cannot accept that it is right and just and democratic to sit by."

"I appeal to you, Mr Prime Minister, to reconsider Britain's position before the situation in Bosnia-Herzegovina is cemented in history as

the blackest catastrophe."

The *Guardian* in an accompanying side-bar also hit out at Malaysia's purported lack of freedom under the heading "Mahathir's Malaysia — land of limited freedom".

It alleged people could be detained without charge or trial indefinitely and in December there were 126 detainees. "Drug trafficking carries a mandatory death sentence and Amnesty International says suspects have been tortured."

It also quoted Dr Mahathir speaking at a political rally in May as saying: "We should not be the slave of democracy. In Malaysia we accept democracy but we must not be too extreme. Unlimited freedom is dangerous."

The *Guardian* also compared the strength of Britain's UN peacekeeping force, currently 2,000 men, with Malaysia's plans to send 1,700 troops.

The *Daily Telegraph*, in another front-page article under the heading "Major gets dressing down over Bosnia", reported that Major was unprepared for the ferocity of the rhetoric.