

Keating writes to Dr M but avoids an apology

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SYDNEY: Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating moved yesterday to make amends for his undiplomatic description of Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad as "recalcitrant" by writing to him to say he did not mean to cause offence.

The letter stopped short of the apology demanded by some quarters in Kuala Lumpur, but said Keating considered the issue could only be settled "if both countries are willing to put it behind them."

A spokesman for Keating, who earlier blamed Australian journalists for intensifying the row, said the letter stated the issue had been blown out of proportion and it was not in the long-term interests of either Australia or Malaysia for it to continue.

Keating said in a statement issued on his behalf that his remarks at the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec) summit in Seattle were intended not to cause offence, but to make clear his view that it was up to Dr Mahathir if he chose

not to attend.

His letter followed pressure from some quarters of the Malaysian Government — though not Dr Mahathir himself — for an apology over remarks describing the Malaysian Prime Minister as recalcitrant for boycotting the summit.

Keating said earlier this week he would not apologise but argued that his criticism was merely part of what he called "the rough and tumble" of international politics.

The statement quoted the letter as having pointed out: "The Prime Minister's remarks in Seattle were not calculated to give offence to Dr Mahathir.

"Rather, they were made to make clear that it was a decision for Malaysia and Dr Mahathir if Malaysia wished to absent itself from the Apec meeting and that Australia had clear design interests in the architecture of Apec, interests which it would defend vigorously."

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