

Dr Mahathir: We have no quarrel with Australians, but... Malaysians have taken offence

LANGKAWI, Wed. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Malaysia has no quarrel with Australians but reiterated that most Malaysians took offence to Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating's remarks in Seattle.

The Prime Minister said Malaysia's experience with business people generally had been good but sometimes individuals reacted differently, even if they happened to be leaders.

Replying to questions on Keating's remarks posed by Australian journalists attending the Langkawi International Maritime and Aerospace Exhibition '93, he said:

"Individuals have their own personalities and they react differently. We have no quarrel with Australians as such, but it seems that most Malaysians have taken offence over remarks made by the Prime Minister of Australia."

Keating had called Dr Mahathir a recalcitrant for not attending the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec) meeting in Seattle on Nov 22.

Dr Mahathir told the press conference that Malaysia was not out to quarrel with people forever and ever. The best of friends could become enemies and the worst of enemies could become friends the next moment, he said.

Told by a foreign journalist that one got the impres-

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committed to seeking a solution to the issue, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia was just as committed to all its friends, which was why it did not make remarks which might be offensive.

"But if you want to criticise me, criticise... we criticise many countries, we criticise the United States, we criticise China, we criticise Russia... we should be allowed to speak freely in the international context also. And people should not take offence at that. Not a personal insult. You don't agree with some policies, you say so."

The following are excerpts of the press conference:

Q: Prime Minister, Mr Keating said in Melbourne about half an hour ago, "The answer as I have said in Seattle was not intended to cause offence and I regret it." It seems this is the second expression of regret from Mr Keating in less than a week. Are you now prepared to accept...?

PM: I have always accepted regret. I think the subject is already old. Shall we talk about other things.

Q: How can the subject be old when your Foreign Minister will be putting a package of measures to the Cabinet on Saturday?

PM: Whatever happens now will have bearing on what we will decide.

Q: Are you impressed with Mr Keating's statement in Sydney?

PM: I'll have to verify what

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PM: I didn't study that carefully so I am not in the position to comment.

Q: He expressed his regret in that programme.

PM: If he expressed his regret ... we are happy.

Q: Is that same as an apology?

PM: Why split hairs (repeated twice).

Q: Does it mean that you do accept it as an apology from him?

PM: Would you like me to say that?

Q: Yes, please.

PM: Please ...

Q: The Malaysian opposition parties had expressed their unprecedented patriotism by backing you in this issue and what do you think?

PM: Well ... I think generally it is the feeling of Malaysians as a whole. It is not what I feel but the reaction I think is genuine. And it is people's feelings, I have no control over that. I did not

direct them to say what.

Q: Do you think the problem arises because of cultural differences?

PM: Perhaps personal differences. Even between culture we have differences (interrupted by knocking sound) ... I think somebody is telling me not to answer the question.

Q: Dr Mahathir, you were quoted at the International Herald Tribune conference a week or two ago and I think you reiterated with the *New York Times* that sometimes if you can't be famous, you have to be notorious in order to get your point of view across. And some time ago you said if I quote you correctly, one has to thumb one's nose at government even if while you are wooing business to make a point. So in this case, is there a nose-thumbing exercise to overcome this bilateral dispute?

PM: (chuckle) Well, I was asked this question by this correspondent and I told

him jokingly because I also suggested we should arrest some journalists in order to attract attention and according to reports by the *Herald Tribune*, I laughed after that. So you can conclude the circumstances in which I made those remarks.

Q: It is possible that Paul Keating misunderstood the context of those remarks and the second question is we are a bit confused ... we're wondering whether you could possibly spell out in simpler, clear terms whether or not you accept an apology from, an expression of apology, expression of regret from Paul Keating?

PM: Well, if it is an expression of regret, yes. But you are telling me. I don't know what the content is, so the problem of making comments on something that is reported to you by reporters is that you are likely to react wrongly and as you know Paul Keating made his remarks after being ques-

tioned repeatedly on his views about my absence.

Q: So the Malaysian television has broadcast on several occasions since Sunday the actual video tape of Paul Keating saying that he did not mean to offend you and that he regrets the offence?

PM: But I didn't see that. I have been busy as you know. I didn't see the TV interview.

Q: So what sort of signal do you think this bilateral difficulties between Malaysia and Australia sends to potential investors in the United States, Japan and Europe when they see their businesses being threatened and investment being threatened over a single word of a foreign leader. What kind of signal does it send then about investing in Malaysia?

PM: I wouldn't know but our experience is that we get on well with business people and sometimes there are individuals who happen to be leaders. Individuals

Keating said before I comment

have their own personalities and they react differently, we have no quarrel with Australians as such but as it seems, most Malaysians have taken offence to remarks made by the Prime Minister of Australia.

Q: But it is the Australian businesses being threatened by your ministers and your ministers are given the go-ahead to take whatever directions they see fit?

PM: Yeah ... But I am not in the habit of telling my ministers what exactly they have to say, we give them a free hand. If we do that I might be accused of being a dictator, a person who is intolerant, strict, et cetera, et cetera.

Q: Judging by what you have said one gets an impression that the Australian Prime Minister hasn't officially conveyed his regret in a formal official channel way to you?

PM: I am not saying that, all I am saying is that you tell me that he had said cer-

tain things. I have to verify before I can comment. I should find out because it is dangerous to pass comment when so and so says something at such at such.

Q: Does it mean that he hasn't then conveyed ...

PM: This very latest thing ... you know.

Q: Sir, I understand the Australian Foreign Minister spoke with the Malaysian Foreign Minister this morning and the Prime Minister's regret was expressed during the telephone conversation and that the Australian Defence Minister did the same when he met the Malaysian Defence Minister?

PM: Yeah ... I will ask my Foreign Minister, I have been busy here as you know.

Q: If it should turn out that these reports of Paul Keating expressing regret are correct, will you accept that as the end of the row?

PM: (chuckle) We are not out to quarrel with people forever and ever. The best of

friends can become enemies and the worst of enemies can become friends the next moment. You see this thing happening all around the world all the time.

Q: Would you have apologised if this occurred?

PM: I have made public apologies on many occasions for lesser things.

Q: Do you think this is the lowest point in Malaysia-Australia bilateral relations?

PM: I don't know. I think there were other times when we were also quite sore ... you know when you said we slaughtered Vietnamese and things like that which did not happen. And we were in fact, I mean, literally welcoming them (Vietnamese) and we did feel very sore.

Q: As sore as you feel now?

PM: No, I don't know ... I didn't make a measure of my feelings then. Very difficult.

Q: Sir, Mr Keating also

said that his representation is the correct approach. Any relationship of any sort and values requires commitment from both sides. From our side we are committed, and I ask you is Malaysia also committed?

PM: Oh, we are committed all right to all our friends which is why we don't make remarks ... which might be offensive. But if you want to criticise me, criticise. We criticise many countries, we criticise the United States, we criticise China, we criticise Russia ... we are told that we should be free to speak our minds. That's part of democracy. To us international democracy is as important as national democracy. If we are supposed to speak freely within the country, we should be allowed to speak freely in the international context also. And people should not take offence to that. Not personal insult. You don't agree with some policies, you say so.