

# Chirac clears air over PM's remarks

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**PARIS:** French President Jacques Chirac has written a letter to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad over the Malaysian leader's speech at the opening of the OIC summit last week.

"Your remarks on the role of Jews provoked strong disapproval in France and around the world," Chirac said in a letter to Dr Mahathir issued to news organisations.

"Even though you yourself and your government were careful to reject all accusations of anti-Semitism, these remarks can only be condemned by all those who remember the Holocaust," the letter said.

A spokeswoman for Chirac's office said he wrote the letter after news reports, including in Israel's *Haaretz* newspaper, reported that Chirac tried to block the European Union from ending a two-day summit on Friday with a

formal condemnation of Dr Mahathir's speech in which he said Jews "rule this world by proxy."

The paper said Chirac and some other European leaders, including Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis, did not think the end-of-summit statement was the proper place for a condemnation.

Italy, which holds the rotating presidency of the European Union, condemned the speech on behalf of the bloc.

In his letter, Chirac said he noted with approval that Dr Mahathir's speech called for an end to Palestinian suicide attacks on Israelis.

Chirac urged the OIC to promote mutual respect and tolerance between Islam and other religions.

In **Bangkok**, a White House spokesman said US President George W. Bush pulled Dr Mahathir aside on

Monday and told him that his controversial remarks about Jews were "wrong and divisive."

As both leaders attended the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation forum, "the president pulled him aside between meetings and told him that what he said was 'wrong and divisive'," said spokesman Scott McClellan.

"It stands squarely against what I believe in," McClellan quoted Bush as saying.

Australian Prime Minister John Howard said he would not go out of his way to improve his sometimes testy relationship with Malaysia immediately after Dr Mahathir retires next week.

"As far as our relationship with Malaysia after Dr Mahathir is gone, well I don't expect them to change dramatically in the short term," Howard, who is also in Bangkok for the forum, told reporters. — Agencies