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Media

AMERICAN MEDIA OUTBURSTS ON DR M'S REMARKS EXPECTED

By: Salmy Hashim

WASHINGTON, Oct 22 (Bernama) -- The emotional outbursts from the American media to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's recent remarks on Jews were only to be expected, but a rare few did seem to read beyond the surface of the speech and not too hasty to hammer the outgoing Malaysian leader.

Paul Krugman wrote in the New York Times editorial page Tuesday: "Indeed, those remarks were inexcusable. But they were also calculated -- for Mr Mahathir is a cagey politician, who is neither ignorant nor foolish. And to understand why he made those remarks is to realise how badly things are going for US foreign policy."

"The fact is that Mr Mahathir, though guilty of serious abuses of power, is in many ways about as forward-looking a Muslim leader as we're likely to find. And Malaysia is the kind of success story we wish we saw more of: an impressive record of economic growth, rising education levels and general modernisation in a nation with a Muslim majority," Krugman wrote.

"It's worth reading the rest of last week's speech, beyond the offensive 28 words. Most of it is directed at other Muslims, clerics in particular."

The 28-words, deemed offensive by the American media, the Bush administration, Israel and Jews in general, were uttered by Dr Mahathir in a speech delivered at the 57-member Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) summit in Kuala Lumpur last week where he said:

"The Europeans killed six million Jews out of 12 million. But today the Jews rule this world by proxy: They get others to fight and die for them."

Krugman believed that Dr Mahathir's "anti-semitic" remarks were part of a delicate balancing act aimed at domestic politics. "To keep the economy growing, Mr Mahathir must allow the Chinese minority to prosper, but to ward off ethnic tensions he must throw favours, real and rhetorical to the Malays."

He said the speech indicated "just how strong the rising tide of anti-Americanism and anti-semitism among Muslims in Southeast Asia has become."

"Thanks to its war on Iraq and its unconditional support for Ariel Sharon, Washington has squandered post-9/11 sympathy and brought relations with the Muslim world to a new low," said Krugman.

"Somewhere in Pakistan, Osama bin Laden must be enjoying this. The war on terror didn't have to be perceived as a war on Islam, but we seem to be doing our best to make it look that way," Krugman wrote.

Meanwhile, the New York Times ran excerpts of Dr Mahathir's speech which were delivered in Putrajaya. The Times ran eight paragraphs of the speech carried by the Associated Press, entitled "Views on Jews by Malaysian: His Own Words."

In an op-ed piece, Washington Post columnist Richard Cohen, called Dr Mahathir "a nut, given to extravagant, sometimes repellent statements. Yet in his 22 years in office, he's been seen as a progressive moderate leader. He is also so far removed from the Western tradition of Jew-hatred that it's possible he did not even know his remarks would be deemed insulting and bigoted."

Cohen charged that use of such language was too often a precursor to violence. "In the end, such language could justify the use of the so-called

Islamic bomb, an atomic weapon such as the one Iran is now developing and Pakistan already has."

In a turn of events, however, Dr Mahathir's controversial remarks have turned media attention to the Bush administration's tolerance of bigotry in his own ranks.

The Washington Post, in its editorial, supported President George W. Bush for taking aside Dr Mahathir during the Apec summit in Bangkok and had reportedly told the Prime Minister that his "anti-semitic" remarks were "wrong and divisive."

The Post, however, chided Bush for not criticising remarks disparaging of Islam made by a member of his own administration, Lt-Gen William G. "Jerry" Boykin, his deputy undersecretary of defence for intelligence.

In videotapes of appearances before church groups, Gen Boykin, in army uniform, describes the US as a "Christian nation" and says he knew he would capture a Somali warlord because "I knew that my God was bigger than his. I knew that my God was a real God and his was an idol."

Gen Boykin casts the war against terrorism as a "spiritual battle," saying that "Satan wants to destroy this nation, he wants to destroy us as a nation, and he wants to destroy us as a Christian army."

Gen Boykins' comments have already become political fodder -- for those who push the belief that the United States is waging war on Islam, not on terrorism, and for those who would excuse other forms of religious intolerance.

While chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Gen Richard B. Myers said that Gen Boykins remarks did not violate any rules, and Defence Secretary Donald Rumsfeld declared, "we're a free people," National Security Adviser Condoleeza Rice ducked the question twice on ABC television.

The Post said: "The president ought to be forthright about comments that are wrong and divisive -- whether they are uttered by a foreign leader or by one of his own generals."

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