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MAHATHIR-BUSH

MAHATHIR DENIES REPORTS ON ALLEGED REBUKE BY BUSH

By: Arul Rajoo

BANGKOK, Oct 21 (Bernama) -- Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today denied foreign news reports that he was rebuked by U.S. President George W. Bush over his remarks made at the recent Organisation of Islamic Conference (OIC) Summit.

Referring to foreign wire reports which indicated that Dr Mahathir had been rebuked by Bush at the APEC informal leaders' summit here, Dr Mahathir said: "I don't know how people can come to such a conclusion because I know for a fact that nobody heard what he said to me."

"I want to explain that he did pull me to the side and explained to me why he made such a strong statement against me."

"And I told him that I understood (that)...that is all, nothing more than that," the prime minister said before a packed press conference at the end of the 11th Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC) meeting held at the Queen Sirikit National Convention Centre.

This could probably be his last encounter with a large pool of world media before he retires on Oct 31, 2003 after 22 years at the helm.

A news report from Bangkok today quoted White House spokesman Scott McClellan as saying that Bush had told Dr Mahathir yesterday that the latter's remarks when opening the OIC Summit last week regarding Jews controlling the West by proxy were "wrong and divisive."

McClellan quoted Bush as having told Dr Mahathir that what the prime minister said "stood squarely against what I believe."

Dr Mahathir was asked whether the Americans were saying one thing in private and something different in public as the US spokesman had given an impression that Bush was critical in the conversation.

"I won't be able to say but certainly (he did) not rebuke me. All he said was that I (Bush) regret using strong words against me (Dr Mahathir), "...that was what he said to me."

"I don't know whether his assistant heard it or not but I would ask him to ask President Bush again exactly what he said, but unless my hearing is very bad, it is still very good," he said.

Dr Mahathir said Bush did not rebuke him at all and even after that, both of them practically walk hand-in-hand.

He said Bush had in fact also approached his wife, Datin Seri Dr Siti Hasmah Mohd Ali, and greeted both of them and they spoke for while.

Asked about his personal opinion about Bush, Dr Mahathir said he did not like to say things about other people and refused to comment on the question.

Dr Mahathir's speech, whose overall sentiment called for Muslims to unite to resolve their problems and better themselves, contained several quotes which irked Western audiences, especially in the United States, Europe and Australia, and led them to issue statements of protest.

The prime minister had said that "we (Muslims) are actually very strong. 1.3 billion people cannot be simply wiped out."

"The Europeans killed six million Jews out of the 12 million (during the Second World War). But today the Jews rule this world by proxy. They get others to fight and die for them," he had said.

To a question whether his remarks about Jews have hurt ties within APEC, Dr Mahathir said they had not.

"I explained to them that I can't very well be criticising Muslims countries without at the same time pointing out the mistakes and wrong acts

performed by the Jews," he said.

"Of course the press said that (ties have been hurt within APEC) but not the participants," Dr Mahathir added.

Asked if he would visit Israel and explain to the leadership there on his remarks, Dr Mahathir said he would do that after the Jewish leadership visited Muslim countries and explained why they called Muslims terrorists.

"Then I think it will be fair. So after they have done that, I will go to Jerusalem and Tel Aviv to explain why I said all those things," Dr Mahathir said.

Dr Mahathir's major viewpoints had called for the Muslim Ummah not to resort to violence to resolve problems but rather overcome them intellectually, but this had been largely ignored by the Western media covering the OIC gathering.

In an interview Monday with the Bangkok Post, Dr Mahathir criticised the Western media for having taken out of context his comments made at the OIC Summit last week.

"In my speech I condemned all violence, even the suicide bombings, and I told all Muslims it's about time we stopped all these things and paused to think and do something that is much more productive," he was quoted as saying in the interview.

"That was the whole tone of my speech, but they picked up one sentence where I said that the Jews control the world. Well, the reaction of the world shows they control the world," he added.

"The Europeans and the Americans and others want to condemn me when, in fact, one chap said all Muslims are terrorists. (Italian Prime Minister Silvio) Berlusconi himself made a statement that Muslims are terrorists."

"Did the European Union pass a resolution to say that this is against Muslims?" Dr Mahathir asked.

"Why is it that when people condemn Muslims the European Union does not try to say anything?" he again asked.

Dr Mahathir added, "Israel is a small country. There are not many Jews in the world. But they are so arrogant that they defy the whole world. Even if the United Nations say no, they go ahead. Why? Because they have the backing of all these people."

Dr Mahathir said he believed that his comments at the OIC summit were only partially reported by the Western media because "many newspapers are owned by Jews."

"They only see that angle and they have a powerful influence over people," he said. "Only their side of the picture is given now. The Muslims, we are pictured as terrorists, unreasonable people, unable to administer our countries, unable to develop our countries." -- BERNAMA

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