

22/10/2003

`Bush did not rebuke me' (HL)

Syed Nadzri; Kamarul Yunus

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad has dismissed as untrue reports that he was pulled aside and rebuked by US President George W. Bush during Monday's opening session of the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation Summit.

On the contrary, Bush was nice to him and they were walking practically hand in hand in one instance, he said at a Press conference at the end of the summit yesterday (see Page 6).

He also said that on the personal level, he had no quarrel with Bush.

The 45-minute Press conference, the only one by a head of government to be held after the closing briefing by Thai Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, was well attended by the international media who applauded when he finished.

Dr Mahathir went straight for the issue in his opening remarks, seeking to clarify news reports quoting a US spokesman who said he was pulled aside in between meetings and told off by Bush over his speech at the Organisation of the Islamic Conference Summit in Putrajaya last week.

"I don't know how people can come to that conclusion because I know for a fact that nobody heard what was said to me.

"But I would like to explain that he did pull me aside in order to explain to me why he made such a strong statement against me. And I told him I understood. That was all. There was nothing more than that," he said.

In his speech at the opening of the OIC Summit, Dr Mahathir was critical of Muslims and Jews for the state of the world today, but it was seen by some as anti-Semitic, drawing some harsh responses, including from US spokesmen.

Asked by a Financial Times reporter whether this means that Americans are saying one thing in private and a different thing in public since the impression given to journalists by the spokesman was that Bush was very critical of Dr Mahathir in that conversation, the Prime Minister said it was certain that Bush did not rebuke him.

"All he said was that `I regret having to have to use strong words against you'.

"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 and his (the spokesman's) very good that he could hear him very well, I think he did not rebuke me at all.

"After that we were walking practically hand in hand. So how can you say a person is rebuking another person if our relations after that were all that good.

"He came to my wife to greet her, he spoke to me and I spoke to him like normal participants."

Asked by the same reporter about his personal impression of Bush, Dr Mahathir said he did not like to say anything about other people. "I might sound offensive, so I don't want to reply to that question."

Asked whether his remarks about the Jews would hurt ties within Apec since some member countries had a big Jewish community, Dr Mahathir said they would not.

"I explained to them I cannot very well criticise Muslim countries without pointing out the mistakes and wrong acts performed by the Jews. I didn't see anybody opposing my views. Nobody said anything against me. Of

course, the Press said it, but not the participants."

Another question by a reporter from the Boston Globe was related to US relations with the Muslim world, regarded as having reached its lowest point, and what needed to be done henceforth.

The Prime Minister said the US policies had changed much over the years as it was now more concerned about imposing sanctions than giving aid and sending peace corps to countries.

"It applies sanctions, sometimes threatening military action on grounds not proven. You will dispute this, of course, but that is my impression," he said, adding that the US should try to understand problems faced by governments in administering their countries.

Another question touched on why his relationship with successive Australian Prime Ministers was bad.

"It's not because of me. There is a fondness among leaders in Australia to make nasty comments like calling me recalcitrant. John Howard did the same thing - repeatedly.

"He even cast aspersions on our judiciary as if we do not understand law," he said, adding that Malaysia did not have any history of killing its aborigines. He said those who criticised others should look at their own backyard and temper it with some humility.

Asked by another American journalist about the legacy of a modern developed Malaysia he was leaving behind and whether his successor would be as outspoken and controversial, Dr Mahathir said all the policy decisions of the Government were made collectively by the Cabinet.

"This Cabinet has a mind of its own and it will continue to apply that method long after I am gone.

"Besides I would like to point out that my policy was no different from that of the first Prime Minister. I merely embellished that."

On his reflections of Apec and the various meetings he had attended, Dr Mahathir, who is retiring soon, said:

"(Canadian Prime Minister) Jean Chretien, who is also stepping down soon, and I were asked to say a few words during lunch just now and I reminded them that I was the recalcitrant who did not attend the first summit (in Seattle in 1993).

"Apec has proven quite useful to us and, of course, we have formed good relations with many countries, including with President Bush, and I must admit that he even quoted me when he spoke during one of the sessions.

"On a personal basis, we have no quarrel and that is a very good thing about Apec. We get to know a lot of people."