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Dr M most sought-after leader at Apec

Syed Nadzri; Kamarul Yunus

DATUK Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad is very much the centre of attention at the Asia Pacific Economic Co-operation Summit here and perhaps one of the most sought-after by journalists covering the event.

Thailand's leading English daily the Bangkok Post yesterday carried a full interview with the Prime Minister with an accompanying story on its front page that was headlined with the word "Exclusive" in bold red at the top. The daily also devoted its editorial to Dr Mahathir under the heading Mahathir leaves a Malay dilemma which touched mainly on the just-concluded Organisation of the Islamic Conference Summit in Putrajaya and the Prime Minister's speech at its opening.

Not to be outdone the editorial in The Nation, another widely-read English newspaper in Bangkok, also had Dr Mahathir as its subject yesterday under the heading Mahathir plays it cool at Apec.

In his interview with the Bangkok Post, the Prime Minister emphasised the fact that his OIC speech, seen as controversial by many in Apec, had been taken out of context by some.

He also shared his experiences, the ups and downs during his 22 years at the helm of Malaysia. He also explained the various issues concerning Malaysia's policies, including the judiciary, Internal Security Act (ISA), and the Western Press.

On the ISA, he denied that the purpose of the ISA was to detain political opponents.

"If you like to go through the list of people who have been detained, most were detained before me, not by me.

"When I came to power I released people who I felt were detained for political reasons," he said, adding one of those released is now the group editor-in-chief of the New Straits Times (M) Press Bhd Tan Sri Abdullah Ahmad.

In trying to clear the air over his remarks on the Jews, Dr Mahathir said his speech at the OIC Summit in Putrajaya last week was taken out of context.

"In my speech, I condemned all violence, even the suicide bombings, and I told the Muslims it's about time we stopped all these things and paused to be more productive.

"That was the whole tone of my speech, but they picked up one sentence where I said that the Jews control the world," he told Bangkok Post in an exclusive interview which covered aspects of Dr Mahathir's 22 years as leader of Malaysia, as well as his straightforward views on terrorism, democracy and United States' policies.

Dr Mahathir was in Bangkok to attend the two-day Apec economic leaders meeting which ended yesterday.

In his speech at the OIC Summit last week, Dr Mahathir said Jewish people, because of their ties with the US had an influence in the world which far outweighed their numbers.

This has drawn criticism from various quarters, especially from the West.

"It cannot be that there is no other way; 1.3 billion Muslims cannot be defeated by a few million Jews," he had said in the speech.

But, Dr Mahathir maintained that his comments about Israel and Jews were true, saying that "the reaction of the world shows that they (Jews) do control the world".

In response to this, the US, Israel, Australia and the European Union (EU) have accused Dr Mahathir as being anti-Semitic.

He said that the Americans and Europeans were out to condemn him. Pointing out that the European countries practise double standard, Dr Mahathir said the EU did not come up with a resolution to condemn the remarks by Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi who defined Muslims as terrorists.

"Did the EU pass a resolution to say that this was against Muslims? Why is that when people condemn Muslims, the EU does not try to say anything?" He had said in his speech that the Israelis are so arrogant that they defy the whole world because they have the backing of the majority of the world community.

"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 says no, they go ahead," he had said.

Given such a scenario, Dr Mahathir said in his speech at the OIC Summit, he urged the Israelis and Arabs to stop the killing and to think, pause and settle.

"I even quoted from the holy Quran which says that when the enemy offers to make peace you must accept. I told Muslims you must accept even if the terms are bad. You have to negotiate.

"This is the teaching of Islam. All that was in my speech ...but those things were blacked out," he said.

He also clarified that the Government did not use the ISA on his former deputy Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim.

"He (Anwar) was tried over nine months and defended by a number of eminent lawyers. The judge took a long time to reach a decision and his decision was embodied in a judgment of 380 pages of reasons why he reached the conclusion. But nobody wants to read this because it is too long. It's easier to say the judge was influenced by the Government," he said.

During the interview, Dr Mahathir was also asked on the Israeli-Arab conflict, in which he said the problem in the area is more of a territorial issue.

"It is a question of what is just and what is right," he said, in reference to the Palestinians wanting the Jews to return their land, while the Israelis intend to build a wall that includes part of Palestine.

In the Opinion and Analysis column of the Bangkok Post today, the newspaper highlighted the issue, but in a much more balanced coverage.

The newspaper acknowledged the world's top political meeting of Muslim leaders called for strong action against terrorism at a time of important change but noted that it was too bad for host Dr Mahathir's ill-considered comments on the Jews to overshadow the progress made at the OIC meeting.

It said Dr Mahathir at the very least appears guilty of grandstanding although many believe racism and bigotry decided his work.

"Only he knows for sure. But if he wished to motivate Muslims, as he claims, he had 100 methods to choose from," the paper said.

* Note: Full transcript can be viewed on the Bangkok Post's website, www.bangkokpost.com