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Dr M: Bush merely tried to explain

PRIME Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's Press conference in Bangkok yesterday.

FIRST of all, I would like to thank you all for attending this Press conference. I really want to explain regarding this report that yesterday I was pulled aside by US President George W. Bush and was rebuked by him. I do not know how they could come to that conclusion because I know for a fact that nobody heard what he said to me. I would like to explain that he did pull me aside in order to explain to me why he made quite a strong statement against me. And I told him that I understood. That was all. There was nothing more than that.

Q: You raised many times concerns about the developing world when it comes to the World Trade Organisation and trade talks. Are you pleased with the Bangkok Declaration that Apec has come out with, and do you think it takes into account the concerns you have raised? And you described Cancun a minor success. Do you think everyone else shared your views?

A: Well, the Declaration is not something I would reject. I accepted the Declaration because it leaves room for the kind of interpretation I would like with regard to the purpose of the WTO. Secondly, there were quite a number of people who said Cancun is not a failure on the part of big countries, obviously this came from members of Apec's developing countries.

Q: Earlier, Thai Prime Minister Dr Thaksin Shinawatra said the leaders agreed to fight not just terrorists but also the root causes of the war. Do you have any idea of the root causes? Is there any consensus from the leaders?

A: Yes, I have a clear idea and I did explain. For people who are not directly involved, it would be a little bit difficult to understand. We may not agree over the root causes but there is a need for us to look at root causes because pure military action against terrorists will not work. I explained my experience in Malaysia. Apart from military action against terrorists in Malaysia, we also took measures to reduce or eliminate causes of their action, thereby ensuring less and less support for their causes.

Q: Your remarks on the Jews, does this affect ties within Apec?

A: No, they have not. I explained to them I cannot very well criticise Muslim countries without at the same time pointing out the mistakes of the Jews. I see nobody opposing my views. Nobody said anything against me. Of course, the Press will say, not the participants.

Q: Will you meet Jewish leaders to clarify claims against Jews. And will you visit the Middle East countries and help resolve the crisis?

A: Well, I would do that after the Jewish leadership go to Muslim countries and explain why they called Muslims terrorists. Then that would be fair. After they have done that, I would go to Jerusalem, Tel Aviv, to explain why I said all those things.

Q: So what exactly will you be saying if you want to clarify again?

A: My speech was very clear. I said the Jews have got the whole world behind them, so much so they can defy the United Nations. That means they can become the world power.

Q: Could you comment on the part of the Declaration that focuses on security and counter-terrorism and whether there was too much of this agenda in Apec?

A: I pointed out that security is important in terms of getting economies of countries growing. If there's no security, people would not travel around doing business and there would not be tourism. To that extent, security has some bearing on economic performance, but we are not interested in other aspects of security like military action against any country.

Q: A lot of people are saying that the United States has reached the lowest point with the Muslim world. What is your opinion for the United States if it needs to move forward to rectify that?

A: The US was one of the most popular countries. After (the) last war, we ourselves were supportive of the United States. Over time, its policies began to change. It no longer bothers about aid, about sending peaceful people to help. Instead, there is a trend towards applying force, especially after the US became the sole power in the world. They apply sanctions, sometimes (take) military action even on grounds which are not proven. So now the United States is not much liked by many countries. That is my impression.

The United States should try other means other than force. I have suggested the United States not apply sanctions quickly, but try to understand the problems faced by a government because different countries have different problems. I pointed out in the discussion that when a country is faced with a threat, it has to take action. Malaysia, for example detained people, terrorists, sometime before the Sept 11 incident because we knew what they were up to. When we rounded them up, we were criticised, but now those who criticise us are also taking such preventive detention.

Q: This is your last Apec before you retire next month. Could you please reflect on the past Apec, especially the first one which you did not attend. Do you feel sad to leave the Apec stage?

A: I was asked to say a few words during lunch. I pointed out that I was that recalcitrant person who did not attend the first Apec meeting. I pointed out that was because we felt our commitment and focus should be on Asean and the East Asian countries before mixing up with other countries across the Pacific. But since everyone seems to be for the formation of Apec, we have no choice but go along with Apec.

In the process, we have been able to voice our views. Because of that, Apec has proven quite useful to us. And, of course, we have formed relations with many countries, including (that of) Bush. We spoke during our discussion and we have, on a personal level, no quarrel. I think that is a very good thing about Apec. It lets us know a lot of people and we can get some of our views through to Apec.

Q: Would your successor be as strong, somewhat controversial, as you have been?

A: Yes, the Press will find it hard to believe, but practically all decisions made in Malaysia are collectively taken by the Cabinet. I could not take any decision without the agreement of Cabinet. Even how we dealt with the currency crisis. My first proposal to the Cabinet was thrown out. I had to think of another solution. I believe the Cabinet has a mind of its own and it will continue to apply that method even after I am long gone. Besides, I would like to point out that there is no difference in policies laid down by the first Prime Minister. I only embellished that policy. Probably, I was able to do much more because I was prepared to be nasty.

Q: Earlier, you explained about your exchanges with Bush but during the briefing with the US spokesman, the impression conveyed was that Bush was critical in conversation. Are you saying that the Americans are saying one thing in private and something else in public?

A: I would not be able to say, but certainly he did not rebuke me. All he said was 'I regret for having had to use strong words against you.' That is what he said to me. Whether he (spokesman) heard or not, I would ask him to say again what he had heard. I think he (Bush) did not rebuke, we were walking practically hand in hand. How can you say he rebuked? He came and greeted my wife and then he greeted me, he spoke to me like the other normal politicians.

Q: Your impression of Bush?

A: I do not like to say anything about other people. No comment.

Q: Earlier in your statement, you mentioned free trade can be unfair. Did the leaders discuss the turmoil in Myanmar?

A: I stand by what I said that free trade may not necessarily be fair, but fair trade can also be free trade. It stands to reason that you do not trade with a country in order to impoverish it. You must trade with a country in order to mutually benefit from that trade. We have a saying, "Prosper thy neighbour", and we want the neighbours to prosper, to contribute to economic prosperity. If (they are) poor, it will spill into our country. We insist on talking about free trade, talk fair and equitable - that is stressed in the WTO agenda. On the Myanmar issues, we did not discuss at all.

Q: How much do you see the United States engaging with Southeast Asia?

A: Certainly, the United States seems to be almost trying to make a comeback, interested with countries in the East and Southeast Asia. That is why Bush is visiting several countries in the region. During discussions, he appears to be accommodative.

Q: Does Asia benefit from competition between the United States and China?

A: When people compete, we can have something to do well. We have the option to defect to the other side, and pick and choose. In that sense, we do benefit.

Q: It was said that the root cause of terrorism was that militants were allowed to flourish in Islamic schools. Is Malaysia monitoring or clamping down on such schools? Since you are retiring, are you going to release former Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim?

A: We have identified the root causes and are attempting to overcome the problem. There is militancy and terrorism also among the Christians, Hindus and Buddhists. In Malaysia, we notice that Islamic schools are not teaching religion but "hate politics". One Islamic party in order to win election creates hatred against the present government. It is time to stop, not just close the schools but also stop providing funds.

With regard to Anwar, if I am King of Malaysia, I can just pardon, on my birthday. I am only the Prime Minister who must obey the law.

The law says when a person is convicted and sentenced, it is up to the court to hear the appeal. If the appeal fails, it goes one court higher and if it still fails he can appeal to the pardons board which is presided over by the King. It is not for them to say that now I am retiring I would like to release all prisoners. In Malaysia, I will be popular with the prisoners, but not others.