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Love him or hate him, Dr M still grabs attention

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BANGKOK: Love him or hate him, world leaders and the world media pay close attention to what Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad says. His speeches and words continue to be studied and analysed, generating reaction over a long period of time. It was no different this time.

They paid close attention to his remarks on globalisation and the need for fair trade at the 11th Apec leaders meeting in Bangkok. They sought him out from among leaders gathered in Bangkok for the Apec leaders summit.

US President George W. Bush even sought him out during the Apec leaders retreat to say what he thought of the speech - contrary to reports that Bush rebuked him.

A US spokesman, Scott McClellan, is reported as saying that "the president pulled him (Dr Mahathir) aside between meetings and told him that what he said was 'wrong and divisive'."

Bush is also reported by the spokesman as saying that "it stands squarely against what I believe in".

To a question whether the Americans were saying one thing for public consumption and another in private, Dr Mahathir said he (Dr Mahathir) was not hard of hearing. He added that the spokesman was not around when Bush spoke with Dr Mahathir and Bush "did not rebuke me".

Condoleezza Rice, the national security adviser, said on Monday that "everyone thinks the comments were hateful..."

Not so. Rice does not speak for "everyone". Many agree with the Prime Minister and indeed pointed out that he is the only one who is prepared to speak out and call a spade a spade.

Canadian Prime Minister Jean Chretien shook hands with Dr Mahathir and did not condemn.

"I shook hands with him (Dr Mahathir) like with everybody else," Chretien said .

Undoubtedly the newly crowned 'Sheriff', John Howard from Australia, agrees with Rice's statement. The reaction from Howard, who has no love for Malaysia and its leaders, was not unexpected.

US Secretary of State Colin Powell, who met Foreign Minister Datuk Seri Syed Hamid Albar, was told that the speech should be read in totality to understand the central message.

According to Syed Hamid, Powell admitted that he had read the speech and on the whole found that it had "good ideas" except one or two sentences that "created apprehension".

While they condemn Dr Mahathir when he speaks about the Jews and other injustices inflicted on the poor and the Muslims, there are no such condemnation or reaction when the Muslims are called terrorists.

For example, when the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi made a statement that "Muslims are terrorists" no one protested. "Did the European Union pass a resolution to say that this is against the Muslims?" Dr Mahathir asked.

But this time the European Union had wanted to pass a resolution at the end of the two-day EU Summit with a condemnation of Dr Mahathir's speech at the OIC, where he said in part that Jews "rule this world by proxy".

French President Jacques Chirac and the Greek Prime Minister Costas Simitis, did not think the end-of-summit statement was proper.

In fact, Chirac, in his letter to the Prime Minister, noted with

approval that Dr Mahathir's speech called for an end to Palestinian suicide attacks on Israelis.

Chirac urged the OIC to promote mutual respect and tolerance between Islam and other religions.

Many leaders around the world agree with what Dr Mahathir said. He had received a standing ovation for his speech just as he received an ovation at the end of the Press conference at the Queen Sirikit Convention Centre.

Many admit that Dr Mahathir is very critical of his own people and in fact, his speech was very critical of the Muslims and urged them not to act irrationally and that they should think and strategise.

In fact, the Muslim world has much more reason to be upset with him for taking them to task.

In an interview with the Bangkok Post, Dr Mahathir said: "In my speech I condemned all violence, even the suicide bombings but those things were blacked out in the Western media."

But despite their selective reporting and blackouts by new agencies, the American and the Australian media continue to pursue the issue.

One even wanted to know whether Dr Mahathir would visit Israel to tell the Jewish leaders what he thought of them, to which the Prime Minister replied that he would be willing to visit Israel, if the Jewish leaders go to the Muslim countries and explain why they are called terrorists.

Israel's Prime Minister Ariel Sharon claimed that it would take countries, including Arab countries, to realise that they would move towards "disaster if they listen to him (Dr Mahathir)".

But Sharon, with his policies of incursions into Palestinian land and killings of Palestinians, is creating disaster, problems and havoc in the Middle East, which threatened the safety and security not only of the region but of the whole world.

Sharon, who has support from Washington, has not only violated and ignored numerous UN resolutions but continues to kill the Palestinian people and occupy their lands. He has said that his government was determined to accelerate construction of a security barrier in the West Bank, despite growing international opposition to the project.

The facts cannot be ignored. Truth hurts but one must be able to face the truth and facts in order to ensure that the injustices and horror does not recur.

But even as the Western media criticises Dr Mahathir they admit that they will "miss him" when he steps down at the end of this month. He provides good copy, one Western journalist said, adding that he was not afraid of addressing controversial issues head on.