

Facebook oversight board makes Dr M's statement on France attacks its first case

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A controversial post by ex-premier Dr Mahathir Mohamad following the terrorist killings in France was the first case selected by Facebook's independent oversight board under which the social media company's decisions to remove certain pieces of content from its platforms are being evaluated.

"A user posted a screenshot of two tweets by former Malaysian prime minister, Dr Mahathir Mohamad, in which the former prime minister stated that 'Muslims have a right to be angry and kill millions of French people for the massacres of the past' and 'but, by and large, the Muslims have not applied the 'eye for an eye' law. Muslims don't. The French shouldn't. Instead, the French should teach their people to respect other people's feelings'.

"The user did not add a caption alongside the screenshots. Facebook removed the post for violating its policy on hate speech. The user indicated in their appeal to the oversight board that they wanted to raise awareness of the former prime

minister's 'horrible words'," said the oversight board in making its announcement today.

Facebook created the board in response to criticism of its handling of inappropriate content. The board said it had received 20,000 cases since it opened its doors in October.

Mahathir's posts are among three of six cases that involved content that Facebook removed for breaking hate speech rules.

Mahathir himself claimed that his views were misrepresented to portray him as encouraging violence.

This came after widespread criticism including from foreign dignitaries and after Twitter and Facebook had deleted the nonagenarian's posts, which came in the wake of a knife attacker who killed at least three people and wounded several others at a church in the French city of Nice.

Another case involved a post of a deceased child lying fully clothed on a beach at the water's edge with an accompanying text (in Burmese) asking why there is no retaliation against China for its treatment of Uyghur Muslims, in contrast to the recent killings in France relating to cartoons.

The third hate speech case involved that of a user posting alleged historical photos showing churches in Baku, Azerbaijan, with accompanying text stating that Baku was built by Armenians and asking where the churches have gone, before going on to imply that they were destroyed by Azerbaijani "aggression" and "vandalism".

An oversight board spokesperson said hate speech cases had been "the most significant proportion" of appeals received.

"Hate speech is an especially difficult area," Jamal Greene, one of the board's co-chairs and a professor at Columbia Law School, said in an interview with Reuters. "It's not that easy... for an algorithm to get the context of such speech."

Facebook's board's members have lived in 27 countries and speak at least 29 languages, though a quarter of the group and two of the four co-chairs are from the United States, where the company is headquartered.

Aside from Greene, the co-chairs, who selected the other members jointly with Facebook, are former US federal circuit judge and religious freedom expert Michael McConnell, Colombian attorney Catalina Botero-Marino and former Danish prime minister Helle Thorning-Schmidt.

Among the initial cohort are: former European Court of Human Rights judge András Sajó, Internet Sans Frontières executive director Julie Owono, Yemeni activist and Nobel Peace Prize laureate Tawakkol Karman, former editor-in-chief of The Guardian Alan Rusbridger, and Pakistani digital rights advocate Nighat Dad.

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