

Malaysia's Mahathir says Vatican must do more to repair relations with Muslims

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CYBERJAYA, Malaysia - Malaysia's former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad on Friday urged the Vatican to do more to repair relations with Muslims following the furor over Pope Benedict XVI's remarks on Islam and violence. Mahathir, a respected figure in the Islamic world, said Muslims were justified in being upset over the pope's comments, but stressed that they should avoid the use of aggression in their anger.

"I think (the Vatican) should do more," Mahathir told reporters in response to a question about whether the pontiff's efforts to clarify his intentions and defuse the anger were sufficient. Mahathir didn't say what steps could be taken, but added that the Vatican "mustn't point fingers at people."

In a Sept. 12 address in Germany, Benedict cited the words of a Byzantine emperor who characterized some of the teachings of the Prophet Muhammad as "evil and inhuman," particularly "his command to spread by the sword the faith." On Sunday, Benedict said he was "deeply sorry" about the reaction to his remarks, stressing that they did not reflect his own opinions. Some Muslim leaders accepted his regrets, although others demanded an unequivocal apology.

The uproar across the Muslim world led to protests in several countries. Churches were attacked in the West Bank, an effigy of the pope was burned in Iraq and a nun was shot dead in Somalia in an attack believed linked to the controversy. Mahathir, who retired in 2003 after 22 years in power, said Muslims should seek peaceful ways to voice their views.

"Of course, you can give your comments, but don't be physical about it ... not to the point of burning embassies or things like that," Mahathir said. The opposition Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party staged demonstrations Friday outside mosques nationwide, calling for the pope to fully retract his remarks. In Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia's largest city, some 150 party members chanted "Stop the insults" and held a banner that read "We Muslims are peace-loving people."

Malaysia's current leader, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, who chairs the 57-member Organization of the Islamic Conference, said earlier this week that the pope's expression of regret was acceptable, but urged Benedict to be cautious about making comments that could offend Muslims.

Source: International Herald Tribune