

Mahathir In Final Message To Jews

news.com.au

10-30-3

KUALA LUMPUR (AFP) -- Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad delivered messages to the world's Jews and his own people on his final full day in office overnight after 22 years in power and weeks of controversy.

Under fire for his recent criticism of Jews, Mahathir told a news conference that he sympathised with them over their past suffering, but accused them of now making Muslims suffer.

Asked what message he had for Jews around the world, Mahathir said: "They must never think they are the chosen people who cannot be criticised at all.

"They suffered a great deal in the past. They were killed, they were massacred and finally there was the Holocaust. We sympathise with them.

"We are very sad to see how the Jews were ill-treated by the Europeans. They must remember when they were ill-treated by Europeans they had to run to Muslim countries to seek refuge.

"The Muslims never ill-treated the Jews, but now they are behaving exactly how the Europeans behaved towards them against the Muslims."

He made it clear he was referring to the plight of the Palestinians, whom he said had been expelled from their own country so that it could be given to the Jews.

Mahathir's final weeks in office have been dogged by international outrage over his remarks about Jews at an Islamic summit in Malaysia in mid-October, when he said they ruled the world by proxy, getting others to fight and die for them.

Mahathir has since then defended that statement, but insisted his words were taken out of context and that he also criticised Muslims and called for an end to Palestinian violence.

Earlier, Mahathir addressed parliament, defending his democratic record and predicting strong economic growth in an upbeat final appearance.

Facing opposition questioning for the last time, Mahathir warned that too much freedom could lead to anarchy in Malaysia's multi-racial society and made a strong call for national unity.

"As I retire from the nation's highest elected office, I call upon every Malaysian to rise to the occasion to face the challenges as they emerge and shoulder the responsibilities of citizenship," he said.

"If we do this, there is no reason why we cannot continue to be successful and make this country a model for the world to emulate."

Groups of schoolchildren crowded the public gallery and Mahathir was praised lavishly by some MPs, but the session was free of the tears and emotion which have marked a series of farewells.

Mahathir predicted real GDP growth at an average of six percent a year, which he said would put the country on track to realising its target of becoming an industrialised nation by 2020.

Before that, however, Asia's longest-serving elected leader faced a question and answer session in which opposition MPs probed his commitment to democracy.

Mahathir defended controls such as detention without trial of terrorism suspects and the banning of communists from elections as essential to maintaining democracy.

While the government believed in free speech, he said, it also had to ensure that racial sentiments in Malaysia's multicultural society were not inflamed.

Mahathir, who has always made it clear that he sees race as a central preoccupation, described national unity as the country's greatest asset. Malaysia has a Malay Muslim majority of around 60 percent of its 24 million people, but also large ethnic Chinese and Indian minorities.

Journalists in Malaysia, soon to be bereft of a prime minister who made news almost every time he opened his mouth, were apparently disappointed by this last parliamentary appearance, asking Mahathir at a news conference afterwards why his performance had been so "quiet".

Mahathir replied: "You can make it loud. I can go out with a bang if you want, I can say nasty things. Ask me a nasty question, I will give you a nasty answer."

Nobody did at that stage, the question on Jews came at a later news conference.

Mahathir's chosen successor, Deputy Prime Minister Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, will be sworn-in by King Tuanku Syed Sirajuddin at 3.00pm local time today.

Copyright 2003 News Limited.