

Mahathir's Party Hands Out Anti-Semitic Book

Sat June 21, 2003 05:59 AM ET

By Simon Cameron-Moore

KUALA LUMPUR (Reuters) - Officials of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad's party gave out copies of U.S. industrialist Henry Ford's anti-semitic book "The International Jew" to delegates at their annual assembly on Saturday.

Tens of thousands of Muslim Malays attended the last day of the three-day United Malays National Organization (UMNO) conference to see Mahathir deliver his final speech as party president before stepping down in October.

Delegates at the conference were handed free copies of an abridged version of Ford's book, translated into Bahasa Malay and published in Johannesburg.

The book, first published in the 1920s, also contained the "Protocols of the Elders of Zion" -- originally published in Russia in the early 20th century and used down the decades to peddle theories of an international Jewish conspiracy.

The 77-year-old leader kicked off the meeting on Thursday with a diatribe against white Europeans, including a potted history of European anti-semitism and the formation of Israel at the expense of the Palestinians.

Mahathir staunchly supports the Palestinian cause, accuses Israel of state terrorism and vilifies Prime Minister Ariel Sharon. It is a stand that goes down well with the Malays who account for just over half of Malaysia's 24 million people.

In the speech he also accused the United States and Britain of using the attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001 as an excuse to wage war on Muslim countries -- a notion Secretary of State Colin Powell dismissed as "ridiculous."

Mahathir, whose main opposition wants to turn Malaysia into an Islamic theocracy, had earlier won Washington's gratitude for joining the war on terror and cracking down on Muslim militant groups.

The prime minister, who became increasingly agitated by events leading up to the invasion of Iraq, characterized the peoples of the "European race" as warlike and greedy and said their liberal societies bred low sexual morality.

One Western diplomat described the speech as "bizarre."

"He has a strange view of history," said another, while a U.S. citizen who has worked in Malaysia for the past 15 years described it as "absolutely disgusting."

It was certainly out of step with Malaysia's efforts to attract foreign investment, although Trade and Industry Minister Rafidah Aziz said her leader's words would have no impact on business.

"Business people make decisions not for political reasons, but because there is money to be made," said the doughty Mahathir loyalist.

The pro-government New Straits Times endorsed Mahathir's world view in an editorial but it also depicted how perplexed many Malays were. A cartoon showed an UMNO delegate being asked by his neighbors what he had learned at the assembly.

"European history," came the answer.

Mahathir denied being racist but said the lessons of history compelled him to speak out against the Europeans, who he said included the white peoples of European descent in the Americas, Australia and New Zealand.

Malaysia's "Old Man," as he is commonly known, often sparks controversy with his angry outbursts, and ordinary Malays are used to his ways. At the height of the Asian crisis in the late 1990s, Mahathir blamed Jews on Wall Street for a speculative attack on the ringgit currency, but he subsequently backed off, saying he had many Jewish friends.

"He is tough on America. But he's good. We'll miss him," commented one headscarf-wearing Malay woman in her forties, serving at a refreshment stall.

Western nations will be hoping that his amiable, courtly successor, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi, 63, will be his own man.