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Nobel Laureates Blast Berlusconi Award

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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NEW YORK (AP) -- The Anti-Defamation League honored Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi on Tuesday despite condemnation by several Nobel laureates, who said it was inappropriate because of Berlusconi's recent remarks minimizing the misdeeds of Italy's World War II dictator Benito Mussolini.

Berlusconi was toasted by several world and business leaders -- including News Corp. chairman Rupert Murdoch and Harvey Weinstein, co-chairman of Miramax Films -- during the banquet at the Plaza Hotel. ADL National Director Abraham Foxman acknowledged the controversy while giving Berlusconi the group's distinguished statesman award.

"I don't ever remember receiving as many phone calls asking me how I feel, am I sure I want to do this, as I have received about tonight," Foxman said. "Prime Minister Berlusconi, we are delighted to have you here tonight."

The Anti-Defamation League was honoring Berlusconi because of his support for the U.S. war on Iraq and for Israel. That decision was criticized by three Nobel laureates -- economists Franco Modigliani, Paul Samuelson and Robert Solow of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology -- in a letter published in The New York Times on Tuesday saying the ADL's decision was "shocking to anyone who knows Mr. Berlusconi's controversial history."

They were referring to a statement by Berlusconi which appeared earlier this month in London's conservative weekly The Spectator and in a small Italian paper. He was responding to an interviewer who equated postwar Iraq with Italy in the years after Mussolini.

"Mussolini never killed anyone," Berlusconi was quoted as saying. "Mussolini used to send people on vacation in internal exile."

Berlusconi later said he never intended to recast Mussolini's role in history.

"Simply, as an Italian, I didn't accept his comparison, or the comparison of my country to another dictator or another dictatorship, that of Saddam Hussein, which caused millions of deaths," the premier said.

Modigliani told The Associated Press that the published letter omitted the group's

statement that "the ADL should be ashamed of itself and should cancel the event." The ADL seems willing to forgive Berlusconi's remarks on Mussolini because Berlusconi supports Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, and the award appeared to be a political statement, he said.

Berlusconi did not address the uproar in his own brief remarks. Instead, he focused on Italy's longtime support of Israel and its backing of the U.S.-led war in Iraq, and called for Israel to become a member of the European Union, of which he is now president.

"I have always been grateful to the United States for saving my country and Europe from the greatest scourges of the 20th century -- anti-Semitism, Nazi-ism, communism," Berlusconi said.

Earlier, Foxman said Berlusconi's comments on Mussolini were a mistake for which the prime minister had apologized to Italian Jews. Foxman said the criticism was hypocritical and "politically laced." The critics do not like Berlusconi because he supports Sharon and President Bush, he said.

"I don't have the luxury of political views," Foxman told AP before the speech. "Here is a leader who is not only sensitive and supportive (of Israel) but has moved Europe to be less hypocritical ... He has understood Israel in these times of trouble," Foxman said.

Solow, the MIT professor, said of Berlusconi that "a man who would call Mussolini benign would think Hitler was a minor irritation." It was "extremely inappropriate for the ADL to pursue what looks like a pro-Sharon policy," he said.

Mussolini ruled Italy from 1922 until his ouster in 1943. Widespread persecution of Italian Jews began in 1938 when Mussolini's regime issued racial laws. In 1943, German troops occupied northern and central Italy, and almost 7,000 Jews were deported, 5,910 of whom were killed.

The Italian Jewish community now numbers about 30,000, mainly in Rome and Milan.

In July, Berlusconi found himself in another awkward situation when he responded to criticism from German lawmaker Martin Schulz by telling the man he should appear in a movie as a Nazi concentration camp guard.

Berlusconi said the remark was meant as a joke and later expressed regret, but he did not apologize. The incident led to a brief diplomatic spat with Germany.

When Berlusconi traveled to the Middle East last year, he met with Sharon but not with Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat. He has also suggested that Israel be considered for membership in the European Union.