

THE NATION

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Has Mahathir offset or created racial tension?

MALAYSIA yesterday closed down three newspapers and police held 55 prominent persons in preventive custody ostensibly fearing the flareup of racial riots. Inspector General of Police Haniff Omar told a news conference that politicians both from government and opposition parties, environmentalists, educators, consumer group members and others have been arrested because that was necessary as the situation in the country was "tense".

Ordered closed were English-language newspaper *The Star*, Chinese-language *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and Malay-language weekly *Watan*. *The Star's* main columnist, Tunku Abdul Rahman, first prime minister of Malaysia, recently commented in strong language on the increase in racial tension between the Malays and the Chinese and criticized the government of Prime Minister Mohammad Mahathir. His column said that the racial tension in Malaysia could deteriorate and become worse than in Lebanon or Fiji unless steps were taken immediately.

Tension between the Malays and the Chinese — even between coalition partners United Malays National Organization (UMNO) and Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) — became worse over an Education Ministry plan to appoint non-Chinese speakers to administrative posts in Chinese schools. Malays and Chinese have held large rallies this month over this issue. A major UMNO rally had been planned for

Sunday but Mahathir has banned all rallies.

Top men of the 55 arrested are opposition leader Lim Kit Siang and UMNO member Ibrahim Ali. Ibrahim Ali is a political ally of former Trade and Industry Minister Tengku Razaleigh who almost unseated Mahathir as UMNO leader at an acrimonious party congress last April. Since then, apart from racial tensions, the rift within UMNO itself has been growing.

Justifying the arrests, the largest under Mahathir's stewardship, Haniff Omar, Malaysia's top policeman, said, "A dangerous situation is developing, which if not contained could lead to racial disturbances." He referred to the bloodbath of the 1969 racial riots which even spilled over to Singapore but was nipped in the bud.

The detention without trial of the 55 persons and the closing down of three publications are legal under Malaysian law but were they necessary? Why didn't Mahathir take Tunku Abdul Rahman's advice and create a Malay-Chinese panel to defuse the tension? Obviously he did not want to.

It is extremely likely that Mahathir had reached a stage when he was not able to control his own UMNO and with the MCA and the opposition parties pitching in, he decided to create a crisis situation which suspended the parliamentary process. If that is the case, Mahathir has committed the worst blunder in his political career.