

AWST 29/10/87

New Detentions Net Malaysia's Chief Dissidents

By STEPHEN DUTHIE

Special to THE ASIAN WALL STREET JOURNAL
KUALA LUMPUR — Malaysia has arrested some 63 people in a campaign against what the government calls racial and religious extremism.

The two-day police sweep was continuing Wednesday evening, with the unofficial count of those detained rising to 71. They are all being held under the Internal Security Act, which allows indefinite detention without trial.

In addition, three national newspapers — the English-language Star, the Chinese-language Sin Chew Jit Poh and the Ma'ala-language Watan — were closed Wednesday by Malaysia's Ministry of



Mahathir Mohamad

Home Affairs. The ministry's order withdrawing the newspapers' publishing licenses cited the publication of stories "prejudicial" to national order and security as the reason for shutting the two dailies and the Malay-language biweekly.

Speaking before Parliament Wednesday, Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad said those arrested were fanning the flames of racial unrest and religious zealotry among the country's ethnically diverse population. The tension they created, he added, paved the way for "communists to go fishing in murky waters."

Came Suddenly

Dr. Mahathir said the crackdown came suddenly because "we can't wait for riots to erupt. Preventive action must be taken now to save the country from disastrous riots."

The prime minister announced that the Ministry of Home Affairs has banned all rallies, including Sunday's celebration of the 41st anniversary of the country's dominant political party, the United Malays National Organization. Dr. Mahathir is president of the party.

UMNO Secretary-General Sarusi Junid had predicted that 500,000 party members and supporters would descend on the nation's capital in a show of Malay unity and sovereignty. The potential for racial strife was evident, and grocery stores in the Kuala Lumpur area reported runs on essential foodstuffs and canned goods in anticipation of curfews and unrest.

The cancellation of the celebration was widely welcomed. Both the opposition Democratic Action Party and the Malaysian Chinese Association, a member of the ruling National Front coalition, urged their members and the public to remain calm. Several members of both parties have been detained, but neither party reacted bitterly to the detentions.

Malaysian Bar Council president Param Cumaraswamy said the legal group intends within several days to file writs of habeas corpus on behalf of all those detained. He said the bar council has a team of lawyers working on the writs, which will argue that it is illegal to hold the detainees without formally charging them with misconduct.

'Bolder' Media

Dr. Mahathir's statement before Parliament was the first official government acknowledgment and explanation for the arrests, which began at 2 a.m. Monday. While the prime minister didn't refer to the closing of the three newspapers, he maintained that the "mass media had become bolder" in publishing reports that fueled racial and religious tensions.

Earlier Wednesday, Malaysia's Inspector general of police, Mohamed Haniff Omar, announced at a press conference that the detainees were arrested because "we have every reason to believe that they have been

Please Turn to Page 7, Column 1

Continued From First Page

involved in activities which have or can threaten the security of the country." When he began the press conference at about 10 a.m., 54 persons had already been officially detained.

Tan Sri Haniff said the action was initiated by the police and not ordered by government political leaders. "Our only consideration is security, not politics," he said.

The Internal Security Act permits indefinite detention without trial. Under the 1960 legislation, police have as much as 60 days to hold and investigate a person detained and submit a report to the Ministry of Home Affairs. The ministry then can decide to release the detainee or order a maximum two-year detention, which can be renewed indefinitely. Dr. Mahathir heads the ministry.

Political Jockeying

Despite the dire warnings by the prime minister and Tan Sri Haniff, the arrests and newspaper closings were greeted with some skepticism by many Malaysians and outsiders. Their skepticism was compounded by the absence of any incidents of racial unrest and violence. The tense atmosphere and the government's actions appear to be largely the product of jockeying for advantage by political groups championing issues dear to their ethnic constituencies.

Those arrested and identified by the police in the past two days span all of Malaysia's three major racial groups — the Malay majority and the Chinese and Indian minorities — as well as a range of occupations from rubber tappers and night-market hawkers to businessmen and political leaders. The only common thread, analysts said, is that they appear to have periodically opposed several government policies or offended the UMNO leadership's sensibilities.

Amid the initial lack of official confirmation and the sudden startling revelation of numerous arrests, political analysts said it was hard to explain what it all means.

Questions abound, among them: Why did the country's leaders let racial tensions fester? And why were leading UMNO and administration officials close to Dr. Mahathir allowed to go ahead with the organization of Sunday's rally?

The police action and newspaper closures haven't eliminated some of Dr. Mahathir's more pressing problems. A legal suit by 11 UMNO dissidents seeking to have April's party leadership elections declared invalid and new polls held is still before the court. A hearing is scheduled to be set within several weeks.

A fresh party poll is bound to draw the deep UMNO divisions out into the open yet again. In April, Dr. Mahathir narrowly escaped defeat at the hands of former Trade and Industry Minister Razaleigh Hamzah. The odds are that the prime minister would face an equally bruising battle if the suit succeeds.

In another legal action, Lim Kit Siang, secretary-general of the Democratic Action Party and the country's chief opposition leader, is seeking to quash government efforts to award the country's largest-ever public-works project, the M\$3.42 billion (US\$1.36 billion) north-south highway, to a company controlled by UMNO. Mr. Lim

was among those detained by the police Special Branch unit.

Malaysian law would permit him to pursue his action and to attend the court proceedings, albeit without his lawyer, Karpal Singh. Karpal Singh, a member of Parliament and the DAP, also was arrested with Mr. Lim. Malaysian law doesn't permit lawyers under arrest to be released to assist in court actions. Mr. Lim, however, can seek a substitute attorney.

Ctd

CTD AWAT 29/10/87

Political analysts and business officials also wonder whether the potential political benefits for Dr. Mahathir from the police action outweigh the longer-term fallout of international criticism and investors' dismay.

A Singapore-based broker said he talked to London fund managers Tuesday night "and they're very upset. This will whip out foreign investment." The broker also predicted dire consequences for the stock market. That assessment may not hold once Malaysia's economy fully recovers and stock markets world-wide rebound.

But judging from further steep declines Wednesday on the closely linked Kuala Lumpur and Singapore exchanges, especially among Malaysian blue chips, the police action made investors skittish. The Kuala Lumpur composite index fell 11.3%, and Singapore's Straits Times index was down 6.8%.

There is the additional threat of a wedge being driven between UMNO and its longtime partner, the Malaysian Chinese Association, even though the MCA's initial reaction to the detentions was mild.

Although the Internal Security Act has been used extensively in the past, particularly against suspected communists, Malaysian analysts couldn't recall a period since the mid-1970s when the act was used on such a scale over such a short period.

Among the roughly 63 detainees held as of early Wednesday night, at least 10 members of the DAP, several of whom hold parliamentary posts, were rounded up in the police action. Mr. Lim's eldest son, Lim Guan Eng, also was arrested; he too is a member of Parliament.

For Mr. Lim, his arrest marks the second time he has been detained under the Internal Security Act. Following the 1969 riots, Mr. Lim was arrested at Kuala Lumpur's Subang International Airport upon his return from the Malaysian state of Sabah. He spent the next 18 months in a prison cell, working on a law degree and improving his fluency in Malay.

Lee Lam Thye, deputy secretary-general of the DAP, said that the party "categorically denies playing with racial emotions of the people," as alleged by Dr. Mahathir. He added that "we are prepared to do our part to reduce the present tense situation" and that the DAP has called off all its scheduled public meetings.

Three members of UMNO were known to have been arrested, including Mohamed Fahmi Ibrahim, a member of UMNO's Selangor state executive committee, and Tajuddin Rahman, a member of the party's central executive committee.

Four members of the MCA were detained, among them MCA vice president Chan Kit Chae and Yap Pian Hon, head of the party's youth wing.

In addition, five members of the funda-

mentalist opposition Parti Islam Se-Malaysia were known to have been arrested.

Other detainees are affiliated with Chinese educational causes, an area that recently has aroused racial antagonism, and with public interest groups. Among those arrested from the public-interest groups was Chandra Muzaffar, president of the multi-racial social-reform group Aliran, which is based in Penang.

Groups whose members have been detained are calling for their immediate release or court trials.

Aliran asked the government "to substantiate the charges against Mr. Chandra and bring him to trial in an open court." The Consumer Association of Penang similarly urged that the government "immediately and unconditionally release all those arrested as the first step to help stabilize the situation in the country, defuse the racial sentiment aroused and reassure public confidence."

The association's president, S.M. Idris, stated that "these arrests have also shaken public confidence at a time when all efforts to revive the economy from the collapse of the market are of paramount importance."

A lawyer who performs volunteer work for the association, Meenakshi Raman, was among the initial batch of detainees. Her continued detention, said Mr. Idris, "would seriously hamper the confidence of all those genuinely committed to promoting justice."

In his address to Parliament, Dr. Mahathir suggested that his administration's openness has invited the rise of political hostility and government criticism. He correctly pointed out that the number of Internal Security Act detainees under his six-year stewardship has dramatically decreased — to about 20 until now, from several hundred.

Media's Freedom

He also said the media have never been freer in their reporting, but Malaysian analysts disagree on that issue.

Several major national newspapers, including the English-language New Straits Times, are controlled by UMNO, as is the only private television station in the country. The party always receives prominent coverage by those news organizations, and the coverage is seldom critical.

The government owns Radio-Television Malaysia, which operates two television channels. Those, too, seldom stray from the government line.

The Star has been the most critical in its coverage of UMNO and government affairs. The closure of the 152,000-circulation daily eliminates the slightly larger-circulation New Straits Times' competition for English-language readers.

F.F. Fong, the Star's group editor, said he had no forewarning of the move to close the paper. "We heard some rumbles earlier in the morning," he said. "But the letter at noon from the ministry took us by surprise."

Sin Chew Jit Poh extensively covers issues of concern to the Chinese community, while Watan has been critical of waving the banner for Malay interests.

Dr. Mahathir said the police have been observing for some time "certain quarters" who have "magnified racial issues" for their political advantage. He singled out the DAP for creating a stir among the

Chinese on educational, language and cultural issues.

A recent incident noted by the prime minister involved the appointment of non-Mandarin-speaking teachers to senior posts in Chinese primary schools. Political parties that are members of the governing coalition headed by UMNO joined opposition parties in protesting the appointments and supported boycotts of the primary schools earlier this month.

Chinese educators and parents maintain that non-Mandarin-speaking administrators lack the understanding to perpetuate their cultural heritage. Mandarin is the language of instruction in Chinese primary schools.

Other issues noted by Dr. Mahathir involved the questioning of the sovereign status of Malays guaranteed by the constitution and the uproar created when administrators at the University of Malaya dropped non-Malay-language instruction in elective courses.

The prime minister also maintained that Malays, particularly members of Parti Islam Se-Malaysia, have been stirring religious animosity toward non-Moslems. In addition, he said a few Moslem converts to Christianity have been proselytizing among Malays, virtually all of whom are Moslem.

Given these pressures, the prime minister said, "the government dare not wait for riots to break out before we stop this activity."

Tan Sri Haniff, the police inspector general, said the police are braced to handle any explosive racial incident or protest against the detentions. He said, "All police forces are on standby and all police control centers are fully manned."