

Mahathir cracks down

'Cannot wait until riot flares,' says PM

By Suhaini Aznam in Kuala Lumpur

After weeks of political and racial tension, and fearing a breakdown in law and order, the Malaysian Government on 27 October detained 63 people including opposition leader Lim Kit Siang, in its biggest swoop under the Internal Security Act (ISA) since the 12-year anti-communist Emergency was lifted in 1960. At least 15 of the detainees are from opposition political parties, six from the ruling coalition parties, six from public-interest groups and three Chinese educationists.

The following day, the government revoked the publishing licence of three local newspapers: the English-language daily *The Star*, the Chinese-language *Sin Chew Jit Poh* and the Bahasa Malaysia tabloid *Watan*. *The Star*, owned by the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), is the more editorially indepen-

dent of the country's two English-language newspapers while *Watan* gives a regular airing to opposition views. The revoking of their licences, like the detentions, are theoretically indefinite.

Speaking on national television on 28 October, Prime Minister Datuk Seri Mahathir Mohamad accused the opposition Democratic Action Party (DAP) of championing racial issues — particularly Chinese and Indian issues — which in turn had caused National Front parties to try to out-do it. This had produced a heightened reaction from Malays, he said.

"The government can not wait until riot flares up before taking action," he added.

Stating that the arrests were made because a breakdown in law and order was imminent, the Inspector-General of Police Tan Sri Haniff Omar, said: "If it

is not imminent, we would not have acted now." The arrests were made on his orders. The grounds for arrest were not specified, Haniff merely saying that "we have sufficient grounds." Under the ISA, the police can detain a person without trial for a maximum of 60 days, after which further detention is possible with the signature of the home minister.

"The police gave deep consideration to what we have done and we found it absolutely necessary to contain the dangerous situation in the country," Haniff said. Whether the spate of arrests would stop at 63 "depends on the outcome of present investigations," he added. "We will detain more people if it's necessary."

Two leaders from the dominant United Malays National Organisation (Umno) Youth wing, Tajuddin Abdul Rahman and Ibrahim Ali, were among those detained. Others from the ruling coalition held in the swoop included MCA youth chief Datuk Yap Pian Hon and vice-president Chan Kit Chee.

Ironically, Lim, leader of DAP, and vociferous DAP lawyer Karpal Singh were arrested when they went to the police station to inquire about two earlier arrests of DAP members — one of them Lim's son, Malacca MP Lim Guan Eng.

Conspicuous among the detainees from public-interest groups were Aliran president Chandra Muzaffar, Consumer Association Penang legal adviser Meenakshi Raman and Tan Ka Kheng, vice-president of the Environmental Protection Society Malaysia, a staunch campaigner in the Papan anti-radioactive movement.

The detainees came from a wide cross-section of professions and affiliations, and Haniff told a press briefing that some of them acted in concert while others acted individually.

To remove one of the more contentious personalities from the scene, the MCA on the night of the arrests sent controversial Labour Minister Lee Kim Sai on extended leave and he flew to Australia. Umno had been demanding Lee's resignation because of his stand on Chinese education — the issue which sparked the whole crisis (REVIEW, 29 Oct. and page 26).

Apart from the security needs mentioned by Haniff, other reasons for the startling action are still unclear. One theory bandied about is that the arrests are to placate Umno for the fact that a mammoth and potentially provocative rally planned for 1 November was called off by the prime minister. ■