

Dr M: Keating can come another time

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LANGKAWI, Sat. — Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad said Australian Prime Minister Paul Keating's visit to Malaysia next year was delayed because he (Dr Mahathir) has other engagements.

The Prime Minister said Keating could make a visit at another suitable time.

"(It was delayed) probably because I have other engagements. We have to find a time which is suitable," Dr Mahathir said.

He was responding to a question from an Australian reporter before attending the opening ceremony of the Mahsuri International Exhibition Centre at Padang Matsirat here.

Dr Mahathir was asked to comment on a report that the Australian Foreign Office had issued a statement that Keating's visit to Kuala Lumpur had been postponed.

On the Malaysian protest to Australia over Keating's remarks about him, Dr Mahathir said Malaysia had expressed displeasure over the matter.

Yesterday, Dr Mahathir had described Keating's letter to him as not an apology and that its contents were not conciliatory.

Dr Mahathir had said that the only thing Keating had mentioned in the letter was the latter's explanation on why he reacted to the questions by the Press.

During the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation (Apec) meeting in Seattle, United States, Keating had described Dr Mahathir as "recalcitrant" when responding to Australian journalists' questions about the Prime Minister's absence at the recent informal meeting of Apec heads of government called by the United States.

That prompted Malaysia to protest against the remarks.

In KUALA LUMPUR, Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi today did not dismiss the possibility of relations with Australia being downgraded following Keating's non-conciliatory letter to Dr Mahathir.

He said "anything could happen" now that the Cabinet had decided that departments and agencies dealing with Australia were free to review their co-operation, though Malaysia was not of-

ficially downgrading bilateral relations.

"It (the review) certainly will have an adverse effect on the relations," he told a Press conference at Wisma Putra today.

He said Keating's failure to even show a conciliatory gesture in the letter was the most disappointing part.

"If this is Keating's attitude as head of the Australian Government, how can the Malaysian Government and people accept that Australia wants to maintain good ties with Malaysia?"

Abdullah reiterated that "anything could happen if this is the situation" when asked whether he would rule out downgrading of ties.

Abdullah said it was up to Australia to initiate moves in normalising relations as there was nothing Malaysia could do now. Malaysia's

suggestion that Keating write to Dr Mahathir was sufficient on its part.

Copies of the statement Abdullah read out today would be sent to the Australian High Commission here and to Canberra.

He said when it was first known that Keating would write to Dr Mahathir explaining his remarks at the Apec meeting in Seattle, Malaysia had hoped that the letter would contain gestures which would help normalise ties.

Abdullah said although Malaysia did not send any letter as a formal protest, its views and protests were conveyed by the Foreign Ministry's deputy secretary-general (1) Datuk Abdul Halim Ali to the Australian High Commissioner (John Dauth) and by the Malaysian High Commissioner in Canberra when he was at

Keating's office.

He added that Halim did indicate to Dauth, who met him (Halim) at Wisma Putra, that a letter from Keating would help mend ties.

He added that sending letters and notes was not necessarily the formal method of a diplomatic protest, adding that it would not send a formal letter after this.

To a question from a journalist from an Australian newspaper, he said any decision on further measures against Australia should be best left to the Cabinet which would meet on Wednesday.

In PETALING JAYA, Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Minister Datuk Abu Hassan Omar today advised consumers to boycott all Australian goods as a protest against the remark by Keating.

He said he would support

any move and suggestion deemed necessary by consumers and that included boycotting the country's goods.

He also said that the Ministry would not have any communications with the Australian Government until the issue was resolved.

Abu Hassan said this when asked to comment on the Federation of Malaysian Consumer Associations' (Fomca) call to all Malaysians to boycott Australian goods.

In MALACCA, Umno Youth suggested that the Government boycott Australian products, stop sending students to Australia and discourage Malaysians from visiting the country.

Youth Chief Tan Sri Abdul Rahim Tamby Chik said today these measures had to be taken until Keating apologised for his remark.

Meanwhile, MCA Youth said it would start a series of anti-Australia campaigns nationwide.

Its chairman, Datuk Chan Kong Choy, said the campaign would begin next week and "will not end" as long as Keating did not apologise to Dr Mahathir.

Chan, who had earlier chaired the movement's central council (CC) meeting at the party headquarters here, said that the first step would be to launch a campaign to boycott Australian products.

Chan said the State Youth wings had been instructed to initiate the move immediately.

On the "explanation" letter sent by Keating to Dr Mahathir over his remarks, Chan, who is Deputy Culture, Arts and Tourism Minister, said: "We strongly feel that the letter sent to Dr Mahathir did not show any sincerity (from Keating)".

Meanwhile, Deputy Education Minister Datuk Dr Fong Chan Onn said today that his ministry was reviewing its policy of sending Malaysian students to Australia in the light of the deepening controversy between the two countries.

If the present relationship continued to be bad, it might affect the present policy of sending students to Australia, he told reporters here after presenting scholarships to students on behalf of the Pudu Rotary Club, here.