

Aussie Defence Minister:

NOT - 5 DEC 1993

LANGKAWI, Wed. — Australian Defence Minister Senator Robert Ray deflected any suggestion that an apology was in store for Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to mend the rift between the two countries.

Ray added that saying "regret" was as good as saying "I'm sorry".

Looking a bit peeved with the repeated questions from the Press on the need for such an apology if Australia wanted to continue to enjoy good relations with Malaysia, Ray said:

"I don't think the question of apology will arise. The distinction between regrets and sorry, I regard as the same thing."

Ray said this when asked

to comment on the issue after calling on his Malaysian counterpart, Datuk Seri Najib Tun Razak.

He said that his Prime Minister, Mr Paul Keating, was sincere in expressing his regrets and added that Keating had gone out of his way to appease Dr Mahathir by sending a personal letter last weekend containing his regrets if his Malaysian counterpart was offended by his remarks.

"Some of our Malaysian friends here would be probably surprised, like some Australians, that the Prime Minister is not known to say regret as he had done in this case.

"But here, he sincerely regretted his comments and had not intended to offend Dr Mahathir and the Gov-

ernment."

Ray also appeared annoyed by questions that Australia's defence bid for the Royal Malaysian Navy's Offshore Patrol Vessel could be affected by the issue.

He was asked to comment on Najib's statement last week that the Australian defence bid would be at a disadvantage because of this problem.

Directing his answer at the large contingent of Australian Press, Ray said: "What the Minister said, and I ask you not to distort his comments, was that if the bilateral relations deteriorate, all aspects of Australia's dealings will be affected."

Queried if Najib had indicated if there would be any

short-term damage to Australian companies' bids for defence contracts in Malaysia, Ray said: "I am a Minister, not a bookmaker. I don't give the odds."

He also hinted that any Australian bid for defence contracts should be weighed by such factors as quality, fair price, joint industrial programmes and performance.

He added that the assessment should be fair just as Australia would likewise do to Malaysian companies bidding for businesses there.

He emphasised that neither he nor Najib should be entrusted with resolving the problem which he felt was the task between the two Foreign Ministers.

"And I know both Ministers (Datuk Abdullah Ah-

Regret is as good as sorry

mad Badawi and Mr Gareth Evans) are in discussion this morning, spending about 90 minutes. These discussions will go on," said Ray.

He said the emphasis would be for the two Foreign Ministers to find constructive ways to resolve the problem fast and to the satisfaction of both parties.

(In Kuala Lumpur, a Wisma Putra spokesman said Evans did not come to Kuala Lumpur and Abdullah had left for Manila at 9.40am to attend the first Malaysia-Philippine Joint Commission meeting. He said Evans did not meet Abdullah.)

Najib, speaking at a separate Press conference, said he told Ray that Keating had made a personal attack

against Dr Mahathir, adding that calling someone recalcitrant might be acceptable and mild in the Australian culture, but that it was not the case here, or even in Britain.

"I told him that in sporting jargon, you play the ball and not the man," said Najib and added that in this case, Keating had played the man and not the ball with the ensuing repercussions.

"I told him that it would be fair if Keating criticised government policies but personal criticisms like that levelled against Dr Mahathir were intolerable."

Asked if the Malaysian outrage against Keating's remarks was because it was not the Asian culture to personally attack individuals,

Najib said this had nothing to do with local norms.

"Calling someone recalcitrant is seen as an unacceptable behaviour in international diplomacy," he said, adding that he made this clear to Ray.

Asked what was Ray's response to this view, Najib said: "He listened".

In Kuala Lumpur, Deputy Foreign Minister Datuk Dr Abdullah Fadzil Che Wan said Malaysians, including the Opposition, had shown the world that Dr Mahathir was respected by the people in the manner they reacted to the statement by Keating.

He said the disgust shown by Malaysians revealed that Dr Mahathir had the backing of all Malaysians, he said in reply to a supplementary question by Ibra-

him Ali (BN-Pasir Mas) in the Dewan Rakyat.

In Johor Baru, Johor Menteri Besar Tan Sri Muhyiddin Yassin said the State Government would review all dealings with Australia following Keating's reluctance to apologise to Dr Mahathir over his remarks.

He said the State Secretary was currently going through State records to find out whether the State Government had any direct dealings with Australia.

In Muar, National Amalgamated Petty Traders and Hawkers' Association president Chew Ming Teck said today that the association's 65,000 members, their families and friends would boycott all Australian products and advise Malaysians against visiting the country.