

Editor: We didn't say Dr Mahathir sought Paper denies making or was paid bribe allegation

**By S. Jayakrishnan
and Manan Osman**

LONDON, Fri. — *The Sunday Times* editor Andrew F. Neil said his newspaper at no stage had claimed that Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad had sought a bribe or was paid one.

In a letter published by *The Times* today, he expressed regret that if subsequent misreporting of a *Sunday Times* story had led Dr Mahathir to believe he had been accused of a charge "we did not make".

"In the light of this clarification, I hope we will conclude that there are no grounds for a ban on British companies doing business with his Government.

"To encourage this conclusion I am copying this letter to the Malaysian High Commissioner in London for immediate despatch to his Government in Kuala Lumpur," he said.

He said *The Sunday Times* could not apologise for something it had not done.

At a Press conference in Kuala Lumpur, Dr Mahathir, asked to comment on Neil's letter, said: "He does not regret (his actions), he regrets that I misunderstand (the report).

"Actually there is nothing to misunderstand. It is quite clear from the inference that I had received money in order to give a contract to Wimpey. If I misunderstand what was written, lots of other people throughout the world misunderstand it because they have been publishing remarks about how corrupt we all are.

"The effect of that statement by Neil is that I am corrupt and there is nothing that I can do. He implied that I am corrupt."

Dr Mahathir said he had repeatedly said that it was good for the British Press and media to tell the truth.

"When you start telling lies about other people, a lot of problems would be caused to them," he added.

Neil claimed in his letter that Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim was reported as saying that the ban on British companies bidding for public-sector contracts would not be lifted until *The Sunday Times* apologises for alleging that Dr Mahathir took a bribe.

(Anwar in a Press conference in Kuala Lumpur on Wednesday did not say *The Sunday Times* should apologise as a condition for the Government to review the decision. He had said: "Right now we have no reason to revise the decision."

(When asked by reporters what the Government expected the British Press to do, he said: "The British Press should be free to report objectively. The freedom to state the facts... they can choose to be critical. We like the media to write reports which can be substantiated... our frustration is they keep on making malicious allegations and expect us to keep quiet and do nothing.")

Neil, in his letter, clarified that the thrust of his newspaper's story, published on Feb 20, under the headline "Wimpey offered contract bribes to Malaysian Prime Minister" was that the British construction company had been prepared, through a middle man, to negotiate "special payments" to Malaysian politicians in return for a £615 million contract.

He said the company had been led to believe by that middleman that Dr Mahathir would be one of the beneficiaries.

"At no stage, however, did *The Sunday Times* claim that Dr Mahathir had sought such a bribe or been

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Wimpey says it will not take case to Press Complaints Commission

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paid one. Indeed the story made clear that, in the end, no money changed hands."

Neil said *The Sunday Times* had been investigating various British deals with Malaysia because of possible linkage between aid and arms.

"We have no vendetta against Malaysia or its Prime Minister," he said.

He added, however, that it was perfectly proper that *The Sunday Times* and other British newspapers should investigate whether a quarter of a billion pounds of British taxpayers' money used to build a Malaysian dam was really deployed to sweeten a £1 billion arms deal for Britain.

Neil said that goes to the heart of the proper accountability of British public funds, and newspapers should not desist from investigating it.

Meanwhile, former British High Commissioner to Malaysia Sir Donald Hawley has suggested that Wimpey, which has denied it paid bribes to Malaysian politicians in 1985 in pursuit of a £615 million contract to build an aluminium smelter as reported by the *The Sunday Times*, bring its case to the Press Complaints Commission.

He said if the firm did so then it would be a good test case against *The Sunday*

Times which published the article.

The commission is a media watchdog body with its own Code of Ethics and guidelines drawn up by the newspaper industry.

Hawley said Wimpey's argument for redress in this case would be quite specific but *The Sunday Times* could claim grounds of fair report for publishing the article.

However, Wimpey said today it was not prepared to go to the commission just yet.

A source told the *New Straits Times* today that their lawyers would first like to see the documents used by the paper's journalists on which the article was based.

"Our lawyers requested to meet with their counterparts from *The Sunday Times* last Friday but they declined to do so.

"Until we see for ourselves what documents were used as the basis for these allegations we cannot proceed with any complaint against the paper on the article."

He added that Wimpey's lawyers were acting on the case and that no decision had been made on the next course of action.

Hawley when asked to comment on statements by certain British companies and individuals who are considering lodging reports to the commission on the

"malicious and irresponsible reporting" by some sections of the British media said:

"For other parties to lodge reports with the commission would have a more difficult task as they would have to substantiate their claims."

The former envoy, who is still an active member of the

British-Malaysia Society, said several prominent personalities were considering a rapprochement between the Governments of Malaysia and Britain.

He said he was in contact with Tun Ismail Ali, the chairman of Permodalan Nasional Berhad, in an attempt to find a way of resolving the issue.