

19 MAR 1997

LEAD Cabinet-Singapore

CABINET ACCEPTS LEE'S APOLOGY BUT SAYS TIME NEEDED TO RESTORE TIES

KUALA LUMPUR, March 19 (Bernama) -- The Malaysian government today accepted Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's apology and retraction of his disparaging remarks on Johor but stressed that restoration of the old level of relationship between the two countries will take time.

Foreign Minister Datuk Abdullah Ahmad Badawi said the unreserved apology tendered by Lee and viewed positively his intention to retract the offending remarks.

"However, it should be acknowledged that this episode has deeply hurt Malaysians of all sections of society and that restoration of the old level relationship would take time," he said in a two-paragraph statement issued at a news conference at Wisma Putra today.

Abdullah said the Malaysian government noted that Lee had personally signed a press statement dated March 17 in which he repeated his unreserved apology and stated that he had instructed his lawyer to delete the offending remarks contained in an affidavit filed in a defamation suit against Singapore opposition figure Tang Liang Hong.

The former Singapore premier caused a diplomatic furore for describing Johor as a place "notorious for shootings, muggings, and car jackings" in the affidavit against Tang who fled to Johor after allegedly receiving death threats.

Lee and his son, Lee Hsien Loong, who is Deputy Prime Minister, are the plaintiffs in the suit.

The affidavit was made known by Tang in Johor Baharu last Tuesday and it prompted an outcry here and government and opposition leaders alike joined the government to demand for an apology and retraction.

Lee issued an unreserved apology two days later through a statement by his Press Secretary. On Monday, he followed up with a personal statement in which he said he had instructed his legal counsel to seek the court's permission to delete the offending sentences.

Yesterday, Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad deferred comment on Lee's overtures and said the matter would be discussed by the Cabinet today.

This is the second time in a year that Lee had drew the ire of of the Malaysian government. Last June, he claimed that Malaysia did not practise meritoracy when he spoke of the possibility of a Singapore-Malaysia merger. -- BERNAMA

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