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DPM: Both must strive to normalise relations

Ashraf Abdullah; Tengku Sariffuddin

KUALA LUMPUR, Fri. - Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Seri Anwar Ibrahim said today while Malaysia seeks to normalise ties with Singapore, the republic should also share the burden of restoring relations to the old level.

He said the Cabinet at its weekly meeting on Wednesday reaffirmed that the relations with Singapore should be normalised but noted that they should be based on the principles of reciprocity.

He said as the "quality of the partnership" between the two countries has been brought into question by Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's remarks on Johor, it would take time and effort for both sides to re-establish previous levels of confidence.

"Malaysia's stand is that while ties will continue as normal as we have accepted Lee's apology, we hope the Singapore Government will share the burden of restoring our ties."

"The Cabinet feels, along with the Malaysian people, that neighbourly relations are built upon the principle of reciprocity, nurtured by mutual understanding and respect for one another, he told reporters after visiting foodstalls and market along Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman.

The Press conference was held at one of the tea stalls where the Deputy Prime Minister stopped for a drink.

The diplomatic row between Malaysia and Singapore took place following Lee's remarks on Johor, describing the State as "notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jackings".

He made the statement in a sworn affidavit in a libel suit filed in the Singapore High Court on Jan 27 against political opponent Tang Liang Hong, who fled to Johor in January saying he feared for his safety in Singapore.

Lee has since apologised twice.

Anwar said the Cabinet and the people regretted that some members of the Singapore Government lacked insight and earnestness, and even trivialised the events.

When asked why some Ministers, who attended the Cabinet meeting this week, had said the Government-to-Government relations between Malaysia and Singapore would be temporarily frozen:

"There were specific proposals made at the Cabinet, but it decided that bilateral ties should go on as usual although we understand that it will take sometime. It will not be at a pace we would both like to see."

"We have shown a lot of tolerance, respect and support. We have not been abusive and derogatory in our remarks ... good neighbourly relations must conform to the spirit of principle reciprocity.

Anwar said if a wild accusation was thrown at a neighbour and later an apology was offered, it would not be easy for the neighbour to conduct activities as previously.

"I hope there would not be problems for the time being as we have agreed to continue co-operation with Singapore. But it is subject to the stand and attitude adopted by the Singapore Government on whether it wants to enhance ties with Malaysia."

Asked how Malaysia expected Singapore to reciprocate, Anwar said; "That is up to them."

Anwar said Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad was informed of the matter yesterday.

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