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Dr M defers comment on Kuan Yew's move

JERANTUT, Tues. - Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad today deferred comment on Singapore Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew's move to expunge offending remarks on Johor from a court affidavit.

"We will tell you after the Cabinet meeting tomorrow," said a smiling Dr Mahathir when asked if he was happy with Lee's statement issued yesterday evening.

Dr Mahathir, who was speaking to reporters after visiting the Sekolah Kebangsaan Kuala Tahan, near here today, said he was informed of Lee's latest action through a letter last night.

When asked whether he was happy with the latest development, Dr Mahathir said he would inform the Press of his reaction tomorrow after the Cabinet meeting.

Lee issued a statement yesterday indicating that he had requested his lawyers to have the offending words removed from the court records.

He had described Johor as "notorious for shootings, muggings and car-jackings" in a sworn affidavit filed in a Singapore court.

The affidavit dated Jan 27 was in connection with a defamation suit Lee and his son Lee Hsien Loong, who is Singapore's Deputy Prime Minister, filed against the republic's Opposition politician Tang Liang Hong.

Lee's controversial remarks (in the affidavit) had caused a furore among Cabinet, political, business leaders and the public who demanded an apology.

Last Thursday, Lee, through his Press secretary, had apologised unreservedly to the Malaysian Government and its people.

However, the offending words in the affidavit, which triggered the whole backlash, were not retracted, prompting political leaders and the public to demand that they (the words) be expunged.

There also appears to be a subtle disagreement between Lee and the republic's Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong who, on Saturday, conceded that the Senior Minister's remarks were "offside".

"Senior Minister is a member of the Singapore Government. He was offside in his remarks on Johor. He recognises he was offside. He has apologised to Malaysians and the Malaysian Government," he told reporters.

Late yesterday, the Senior Minister, in a signed statement issued in the republic, asked his lawyer, Davinder Singh, to have the offending words removed from the court records.

In Kuala Terengganu, Umno Youth leader Datuk Ahmad Zahid Hamidi lauded Lee's move to expunge the statement from the court records.

He described the latest move as a "shared victory" for the movement and the Government. He also cautioned Lee not to repeat the mistake.

"We hope there will be no incidents in future that can create similar uproar and also jeopardise the relationship between the two countries," he told reporters after a meeting with Menteri Besar Tan Sri Wan Mokhtar Ahmad at Wisma Darul Iman.

Ahmad Zahid also hoped that no controversial statements, which could create friction between the two countries, would be made openly.

In Johor Baru, however, the heat is far from over, with Menteri Besar Datuk Abdul Ghani Othman questioning Lee Hsien Loong's silence on the matter.

He said that although Lee had apologised unreservedly and had directed his counsel to have the offending words removed from the record, his son,

Hsien Loong, chose to remain silent.

"I believe the people of Malaysia also want to know if Hsien Loong shares the same point of view (as the Senior Minister)," Ghani told reporters after launching the 'Malaysia and Canada Working Together In Smart Partnership Seminar' at a hotel.

Touching on the importance of good neighbourly spirit, Ghani said that Singaporean leaders should create good neighbourly attitude among the people of the republic.

"Singaporeans should learn to treat Malaysians, especially the people of Johor, in good neighbourly spirit."

On Lee's statement that the derogatory remarks would be removed from the sworn statement according to the wish of Malaysian leaders, Ghani said the issue not only involved Malaysian leaders but also the disposition of Malaysians as a whole.

"Singapore should be informed that Malaysians, particularly the people of Johor, were aggrieved by such unflattering remarks (as stated in the affidavit).

"I emphasise on the feelings of the public which is of utmost importance and has to be nursed back (so as to maintain a cordial relationship with Singapore).

"This matter is not something new ... it began since our separation in the 1960s, and again, last year (when Singapore expressed its conditional wish to rejoin Malaysia), and now again.

"There is a need for a more positive attitude on neighbourliness among them," added Ghani.

However, he said that he would leave the matter to the Cabinet meeting tomorrow.

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